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HESTER'S SACRIFICE

VOL. I.

HESTER'S SACRIFICE

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE’S,” “JANITA’S CROSS,”

&c. &c.

“Life counts not hours by joys or pangs,
But just by duties done.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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To

My Friends J. and A. B.,

In

Loving Remembrance.

CHAPTER I.

“**S**TAY, my dear. Here is something I want to read to you out of this newspaper before you go.”

And Mrs. Brayton put on her gold-rimmed spectacles, took them off, rubbed them with a snowy cambric handkerchief, put them on again, and then, very slowly and carefully, those dim old eyes of hers travelled up and down the half-dozen closely printed columns wherein were chronicled the sayings, doings, and intentions of St. Angusbury, one of the smallest and dullest of small and dull English provincial towns. Apparently the search was unsuccessful.

Gen. Rev. Ray 12 P. 51 Backstory = 30

“Dear me, now! This is very strange,” and the spectacles were once more taken off, re-rubbed and re-adjusted. “I’m sure Nils told me it was in the right-hand corner, down at the bottom, after the births, marriages, and deaths; but I can’t see anything of the sort. And he told me, too, that I was to be sure and show it to you, for you are so much interested in the School of Art, and your papa does not take in the *Chronicle*.”

“Will you give me the paper, and let me try if I can find it?” said the young lady, who had been addressed as “my dear.”

She was a shy, quiet girl, of three or four-and-twenty. Pleasant to look upon, if only for the reason that there was nothing remarkably striking about her. She was not plain, far from it, but no one would have

called her beautiful, because just now her face lacked that fine glow of expression without which the most faultless features are like a stained glass window, through which no sunlight comes; cold, lustreless, and unmeaning. Still, as you looked at her, you felt that when the sunshine did come, if ever it came at all, there would be glow and glory enough. Most likely she had been taking an early cup of tea with the elder lady, and was now preparing to go home, for she had already gathered her long grey cloak round her, and was carelessly playing with the feather of her hat before she put it on.

“Shall I take the paper?” she asked, “and try if I can find what you are looking for? You must tell me first, though, what it is.”

"No, thank you, my dear. I never like to be beaten with anything. And I feel so perfectly certain Nils told me it was in this corner. Ah! and here it is, too," added the old lady, triumphantly—"only at the top of the page instead of the bottom. I do believe, after all, my memory must be failing me, though I don't like to own it. I felt so sure it was the bottom of the page. However, one can't be always young. Now, my dear."

And, still keeping her finger carefully placed on the errant paragraph, lest it should once more make its escape, and be drowned in the chronicled small beer of Angusbury, Mrs. Brayton gave the paper to Hester Tredegar, and resumed her knitting with a greatly relieved expression of countenance.

The information which had required so much search was neither startling nor momentous. It read thus—

“We understand that Basil Brooke, Esq., late of Kensington, has been appointed to the mastership of the Angusbury School of Art, vacant by the resignation of Mr. Willows. We are also authorised to state that the Committee intend to continue the select class for ladies, and we confidently expect that under the able superintendence of the new master, whose testimonials are of the highest order, this department of the school will regain that high standard of excellence which recent painful circumstances have impeded.”

The “recent painful circumstances” referred to some indiscreet escapades of the present master; which escapades, combined

with incapability and want of punctuality, had caused him to receive a formal dismissal from the Committee.

Hester read the paragraph aloud, then glanced over it in silence, repeating the name again and again, as we do sometimes find ourselves repeating strange names; not because they have the faintest significance for us, but only because of a pleasant music in the sound.

And there was a pleasant music in this.

“Basil Brooke.” It had a sound of woods, and streams, and wild flowers in spring-time. At least, Hester thought so. But then Hester was a fanciful girl, fond of building castles in the air, castles which always came down with a crash before the top-stone was put on.

“That is all, my dear,” said Mrs. Bray-

ton, when the brief statement had been read; "but Nils told me I was to be sure and let you see it, because you would be interested in it."

"Thank you. Mr. Brayton was very kind, and I am much obliged to him for thinking of me. I am glad this class is to be continued."

"Yes. I was sure you would. Nils says you must have a great talent for drawing. He was at the School of Art the other day, inquiring the qualifications of a youth they are going to take into the draughting department of the office, and the master showed him a piece you are doing now, a group of leaves and grasses from Nature. He, I mean the master, said it was the best thing that had ever been done in the school."

“You mustn’t be offended, my dear,” continued Mrs. Brayton, seeing that the girl’s face flushed painfully at this broadside compliment; “I wouldn’t on any account have said it to you in the presence of another person, but I really could not help telling you what the master says about your work. And though, as a master, he is not all that could be wished for, yet he is artistic, and knows when a piece of work is well done. And don’t begin to fasten your cloak, my dear, for I shall not let you go home yet. It is already too late for you to be out alone on the Milcote Road, and if you will just wait a little longer, Nils will be back from the office, and he shall walk with you—that is, if your papa will not be uncomfortable on account of your absence.

“Oh! no; papa won't miss me.”

The words were spoken rather sadly, with a slight sigh, not intended to call forth remark or sympathy, but only the unconscious expression of a deep-seated feeling. Anyone accustomed to study character would have discerned a whole world of weariness and unrest in those four little words, “Papa won't miss me.”

Mrs. Brayton was not accustomed to study character; but she was accustomed to do something infinitely more useful—namely, to make everyone about her as comfortable as circumstances would permit. And so, quietly taking Hester's hat and cloak, she placed her in an easy chair by the window, and said in that cheery, genial way which made Mrs. Brayton such a favourite with all her friends,

“Now, my dear, I shall keep you there for another hour at least. You don’t know how I dislike being left alone through these long spring evenings, when Nils is obliged to stay so late at the office. They are very busy just now, in consequence of some alterations that are being made in the Milsmany barracks. All these things have to go through his hands. Often it is past eight when I get him home. Not that he is a very great talker even when he is here—he will sit for an hour together sometimes, so grave and still. He has been wonderfully changed since he came home from the West Indies, ten years ago—wonderfully changed. I cannot understand it, though I am very thankful.”

And then, as elderly people sometimes do, Mrs. Brayton seemed to lose the thread of

her ideas. At any rate, the outward manifestation of them ceased. A musing expression came into her face, her fingers still moved steadily over the knitting work, but her eyes had the dim look of one who sees only the far-off past.

It was some moments before she began again from the old starting-point.

“Yes, wonderfully changed. That one year abroad steadied him down, and made him like a middle-aged man, so very different from the harum-scarum youth he used to be before he went out. Not that he was worse,” and Mrs. Brayton drew herself up with a touch of motherly pride—“not that he was worse than most other young men of his age even then; only passionate and wilful—never anything more than passionate and wilful. And perhaps,

being an only child and fatherless, I indulged him more than was quite proper. But there is not a better son anywhere now, nor more dutiful than my Nils. Thank God for it! No, not a better son anywhere than Nils Brayton!"

Hester made no reply. The praises of Nils Brayton might or might not have any special sweetness for her. She had been reading over and over again that paragraph about the School of Art, until she could say it by heart; and now she began to fold the paper, and twist it round her fingers in that listless, half-absent way which seemed habitual to her.

"It is a pleasant name," she said at last.

"What name, my dear?"

"Basil Brooke."

"You don't know him, do you?"

And Mrs. Brayton looked rather sharply at her.

"Oh, no! I never heard the name before. Only it sounds pleasantly."

"Yes; and I sincerely hope the new master will match his name. If he does, it will be a good thing for the school. Miss Lapiter will board him, I suppose. Mr. Willows resided with her until he took to being out late at night, and smoking in his bed-room, and that sort of thing; and then, of course, she was obliged to give him notice, and, I believe, she has not met with another lodger yet. I hope somebody will mention it to him. Miss Lapiter makes her lodgers so comfortable. If there is one person in the world who deserves to have her rooms always occupied, it is Miss Lapiter."

“And, then, if he is not a married man,” continued Mrs. Brayton, “and I don’t suppose he is, she will be such a mother to him, and lay herself out to attend to his buttons, and personal comforts. Buttons are serious things. I believe many a young man has fallen into loose habits from nothing but want of attention to these little things on the part of his female relatives. I will step down myself to Rose Cottage, and ask Miss Lapiter if she has made inquiries about him. There is not much time to be lost. Nils told me he was to come in May, and April is nearly half through already.”

“May, June, July,” said Hester to herself, quitting the subject of Mr. Brooke and his buttons. Indeed, that anyone with such a fragrant, wildwood name should stand in need of buttons and personal com-

forts, seemed a sort of contradiction. "May, June, July. Only three months, and I shall be a great deal happier than I am now."

"How so?" asked Mrs. Brayton.

"Because my little sister May is coming home in July, to stay always."

"Always! That means, I suppose, until she marries, which may follow more closely upon her coming home than you anticipate. May; yes, I remember her when she was here two years ago, before she went to school in France—a merry, mischievous, hoydenish little thing, full of tricks and nonsense. No one would have thought, to look at her, that she was fifteen. But that must all have passed away. She will be quite a finished young lady now. And so May is coming home?"

“Yes. But May will never be what you call a ‘finished lady.’ There was something about her that would never be pinched and stiffened. She is such a dear, good, loving little thing. I *shall* be glad when she comes home.”

All the sadness had gone out of Hester's voice now. Instead, there was a rich ring of love and tenderness in it. And if you could have seen her face then, in the half dark of that April evening, you would have called it almost beautiful; for the colour deepened on her cheeks, and her dark grey eyes lighted up, and the smile upon her lips was very bright and soft as she spoke of this “little May”—this sister upon whom her warm heart, shut out from other friendships, spent its rich treasure of love, and found such joy in the spending.

“Yes,” Hester said. “When May comes home I shall have some one to love and be good to.”

“And have you not your papa to love and be good to now, my dear?”

“Of course I have,” and the sadness came back again; “I can keep house for him, and see that he has his meals properly, and all that sort of thing; but he never lets me feel that I can do more for him than a steady servant could do, and you know we would like to do a little more than that for those we love. Papa does not care to have people talking to him, or making a fuss over him, ‘fidgetting,’ as he calls it. But, Mrs. Brayton——”

“Well!”

“I think I had better go home. That pile of cloud keeps getting thicker and thicker,

and the wind blows as if there would be rain."

"I shall let you do nothing of the sort. Nils will be here directly, and if he is with you, you will be quite safe."

"I know that."

And then, as if lingering over what for years had been to herself such a blessed truth, Mrs. Brayton said it again.

"If Nils goes with you, you will be quite safe."

After that, there was a long pause. Hester leaned her face against the window, and looked out into the twilight, a contented smile upon her face.

Certainly there was nothing in the external prospect to make such a smile peculiarly appropriate. The moon had slipped away behind a bank of clouds, whose rugged edges betokened rain and storm. Already

the wind was sighing dismally enough through the trees, and when the wind was silent, you might hear, like a perpetual murmur, the gurgle of the river Lelland, which flowed past the garden. And so thick and murky was the air, that the abbey towers of Angusbury, though scarce a mile distant, showed like nothing but a dim stain upon the horizon. If Mrs. Brayton spent much of her time looking out of the window on such evenings as this, she might well complain of loneliness.

Yet that quiet contented smile kept deepening on Hester's face. Was she thinking of a hand that should clasp hers by-and-by—of the long walk home, which, even through wind and rain, should be so pleasant, because not alone? Was the silent indifference with which she had listened to Mrs. Brayton's

praises of "my son Nils" only an innocent deception, a veil, which, like the cloud on some fair mountain's brow, covers while yet it reveals its height? Or was the smile all for sister-love? Was she thinking of the time, so near now, when "little May" should come home? May, the bright spring blossom, who should take from her overladen heart all the love it longed to give!"

While they two sat so quietly there, the door was opened, and a tall, erect gentleman came in.

Very erect, indeed almost disagreeably so, except that a dark blue surtout, buttoned up to the chin, and a short moustache—an adornment less common then than now—indicated that the gentleman belonged to the War Department of Her Majesty's Service. And as military men are allowed an un-

limited amount of erectness, we may make Nils Brayton welcome to his—more especially as it was blended with a grave, quiet dignity which kept it from stiffening into pride or haughtiness.

Mrs. Brayton was leaning back in her chair. You might have thought she was asleep, but for the gentle motion of her hands, which kept clasping and unclasping, as they always did when she fell into a reverie. This time the reverie was so deep, that she did not hear the door opened, nor was she aware of her son's presence until he stooped down and playfully passed a bunch of ivy leaves over her face.

“Oh! Nils, you mischievous boy! How you did startle me!”

Not much boyishness in that strong, soldier-like face, over which the storms of at

least thirty winters must have beaten—to say nothing of other storms which leave deeper traces than these. But if Nils Brayton should live to three score and ten, he would still be “my boy” to the fond heart whose love was all his own.

“You did give me such a start! And what is that in your hand? A bunch of mint for the lamb to-morrow?”

“No, mother; something much more precious than that. Some ivy leaves for Hester Tredegar. I heard her say the other day that she wanted some for the group she is copying at the School of Art; and I want you to get these sent to her. Be sure that she has them to-morrow, or their beauty will be gone.”

“You need not wait until to-morrow, Nils,” said Mrs. Brayton.

And there was that slight, almost imperceptible tinge of bitterness in her voice, which a mother feels when the love that has been hers for a whole long life is passing to someone else.

“Miss Tredegar is here; you can give them to her yourself.”

Nils Brayton drew himself up, looking vexed and annoyed. Sitting so silently there in the shadow of the curtains, Hester had escaped his notice.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Tredegar. You must excuse me for using your name so unceremoniously. I only do so when I am alone with my mother.”

Hester came forward. If she felt either annoyance or confusion, her quiet voice and manner hid both.

“It was very kind of you to get me

these leaves. I have wished for some very much, but I did not know where to look for them."

And then she took them from him, and, kneeling on the hearthrug, began to arrange them in a group to which her dark dress formed a good background.

Nils Brayton stirred the fire into a merry blaze, partly, perhaps, that Hester might see better what she was doing, partly that, standing by her, behind his mother's chair, he might watch her as she knelt there, bending over her leaves with a face that was bright enough now, though you might not call it, even yet, beautiful.

But he had passed that time when a man's first thought is for beauty of form and colour. He had had enough of that in his time, perhaps too much. What he

wanted now was that other loveliness which the soul chisels for itself, and which cannot pass away, but lives on, while the pure thoughts which have wrought it remain. And that other loveliness he had found in Hester's face—found it long ago.

“But where did you get these leaves?” said Hester, when for a long time she had amused herself by twining them into different designs.

And that Hester was an artist you might tell by the graceful forms which they took under her deft fingers.

“Where did they come from? I never saw any of this peculiar five-pointed shape about here.”

“I got them from the Monk's Crag this morning.”

“The Monk's Crag! Oh! Mr. Brayton,

that is more than three miles away. And you took all that trouble just for me? You are very good!"

"I did not think it any trouble. You know I enjoy walking."

And then Mr. Brayton stopped. He could not think of anything more, having an inaptitude for extempore compliments, or, indeed, compliments of any sort. Neither did he tell her, as he might have done, that the three hours he had spent in walking to the Monk's Crag, and gathering those leaves, must be put back in hard work that very night. Mr. Brayton was a man who seldom said more than was absolutely needful, sometimes scarcely that.

The abbey clock struck nine, a very faint, feeble sound, cleaving its way through all the mirk and mist.

"There, I must go home now," said Hester, fastening her cloak for the third and last time.

"I kept Miss Tredegar here, Nils, until it was too late for her to go home alone, and then I said, if she would stay until you came from the office, you would go with her."

Mrs. Brayton said this without searching in her son's face for the willingness which she knew well enough would be found there.

He dived into his pocket for a bundle of blue, official-looking papers, the over-work resultant upon his morning's walk, and laid them carefully within a brass-bound desk that stood in one corner of the room.

"I am quite at your service, Miss Tredegar."

And with that brief intimation they both took their way through the rainy twilight to Milcote.

When they were gone, Mrs. Brayton got to her knitting again, but it made little progress. Over the sweet, motherly goodness of her face there came by and by a half-sad expression, which, with an earnest look she cast upon a solitary ivy-leaf that had fallen upon the hearth-rug, said, as plainly as any words could speak,

“It must be so. Yes, it must be so.”

Then that half-sad expression cleared away, to make room for one of quiet content, even pleasure. And she whispered to herself, as she set to work again upon the knitting,

“It is well. I am quite content.”

CHAPTER II.

ST. ANGUSBURY-CUM-MONKLANDS,
 S as it was entered in the old chronicles and parish registers; or St. Angusbury, as the High Church clergyman used to put at the head of his letters; or Hangerby or Angley, or Anly, as it was variously christened by the country people in their uncouth provincial dialect; or simple Angusbury, as most of the respectable people called it—this place, then, with as many names as a Spanish Infanta, overflowed with maiden ladies, widows, elderly dowagers, and unmarried women of all grades.

Literally overflowed; for after appropriating all the suitable houses within the strictly parochial limits of the town—the grey old tenements round the Abbey Close, the tall, rigid family mansions of the High Street, the grim apartments of St. Angus College—long ago deserted by its scholastic occupants, and now let out in suites of rooms—they poured into the outskirts, and swarmed like bees in the multitudinous Parades, Terraces, Crescents, and Squares, whose tight, trim little fronts and shining gardens made Angusbury look like those miniature towns which children build out of toy boxes.

Some people used to say it was not “overflowed,” but “infested” with this class of the population. These, however, were sour, ill-natured people, chiefly tax-gatherers,

and Commissioners' rates collectors. And they said it, because these widows, aunts, and elderly females, who, in a general way, had very small incomes, would hurry on their bonnets and slip out of the back door when the aforesaid collector, with ink-horn and blue paper, was seen coming up the street—thereby putting off the evil day for themselves, but causing him a vast amount of needless trouble, which resulted, as needless trouble is apt to result, in ill-temper and ill words.

But, though any well-bred person would hesitate before applying the ugly word "infest" to the occupiers of those neat little tenements which came within the provisions of the income tax or the water rate, still it cannot be denied that a considerable amount of gossip was done in

Angusbury, and much evil-speaking, and scandal, and censoriousness perpetrated by the worthy ladies who were wont to take their knitting and go out to tea with a view to whist or conversation. Possibly, too, many a deep and deadly feud, many a grudge which never got satisfactorily smoothed or settled, many a little drop of poison which, falling in the cup of domestic love, turned it into gall and bitterness, might be traced to its source in those snug four-handed tea-parties, concerning which the members thereof said, when they came home, "Delightful! very delightful! never spent such a delightful evening in my life!" Was it not at one of these "delightful evenings" that a remark was dropped concerning the frequent visits of Mr. A. to Miss B., the pretty daughter of

the Angusbury surgeon; and did not Mrs. C. take the first opportunity of calling upon Miss B., and telling her that her engagement to Mr. A. was positively settled, and in everybody's mouth? Whereupon Miss B., who was a shy, sensitive girl, and rather attached to Mr. A., behaved so coldly to him next time he came, that the poor man, who was also sensitive, felt himself aggrieved, and visited the house no more. And so two people, who might have been very happy, were made very unhappy. Again, if the fiery-tempered Mrs. D., who cut the acquaintance of her dear friend Mrs. E., on account of some rude and insulting remarks which Mrs. E. had made relative to the number of servants which she kept, had taken the trouble to sift the matter far enough, would she not have found that it

arose from the mischievous Mrs. C. wilfully misunderstanding a remark which was made by Mrs. F. at her whist party, and afterwards putting it about that Mrs. D. was increasing her establishment to such an extent as would shortly bring her husband into the Gazette? Divers other little disagreeablenesses, too, might doubtless have been traced to a similar source; so that, on the whole, Angusbury was not always thankful for its redundant female population.

But then there were statements to be made on the other side. If Angusbury feminine did sometimes indulge itself in this way—and since women cannot, like men, amuse themselves by finding fault with the Government, it seems hard that they may not supply the deficiency by finding fault

with each other—it did much good in other ways. People were never known to die of starvation in Angusbury, as they have been known to die in other places which pride themselves on freedom from scandal, and idle women. No poor little poverty-stricken cripple there lacked sweets and dainties, supplied by some “unappropriated” hand, or flowers whose bright colours and spring-like perfume might bring some sunshine into its lonely life.

The destitute widows never complained that they were neglected in the daily ministration. No poor dying man slipped into his grave without some voice to speak a gentle word to him, or guide him to the great, sweet rest which lies for those who will seek it, beyond this life's toil and weariness. Perhaps, after all, Angusbury might have found

itself in a worse position had the census returns been different.

But if the place was perennially overflowed with maiden ladies, it was also, at certain seasons of the day, deluged with a mysterious, inexplicable current of little, middle-sized, and big boys; little boys, with very white collars and very shiny shoes; middle-sized boys, whose yearnings were for hot pies and penny cheesecakes; big boys, who had a weakness for fancy ties, and stand-up collars, and anything which gave them the appearance of men. This periodical tide of male juvenility, so incapable of being accounted for by natural causes, used greatly to perplex the stranger in Angsbury, until he learned that the place was almost as rich in grammar schools as in maiden ladies, and that, in fact, the annual

importation of widows, maiden aunts, and godmothers was owing to the facilities which the town afforded to those who had large families, whether of nephews or sons, and small means for the education thereof.

But whither these boys went, as they reached the stage of dress-coats, and developed into youths, was a mystery which no stranger ever did unravel. For certainly never was a man of them seen in the streets of Angusbury. It was a stream of boys which flowed down those streets—boys, boys; never anything but boys. Whether some fairy had gifted them—most needlessly—with immortal youth; whether they vanished into thin air, or were lured away by evil sprites, or got absorbed into distant offices and warehouses, or were seized upon by Government and sprinkled over the

Civil Service Department, or went to swell the Army and Navy lists, one thing is certain—as they reached man's estate, they invariably disappeared from Angusbury.

But, alas! the maiden aunts and widowed mothers who had brought them, did not likewise disappear. No; they lingered behind, finding the place convenient for rent and respectability. So that, whereas the stream of boys was ever flowing, the residuum of maiden relatives was ever deepening. Like some great river, whose deposit increases in proportion to the rapidity of its current, that mighty tide of boys was gradually choking up its own channel. And unless by some gigantic scheme of social engineering this deposit of elderly gentlewomen could be removed, there was danger that the navigation of the place would

be obstructed, and in the end destroyed.

Angusbury was a pleasant town in its way, which was a very quiet way. It had a fine old abbey, with two lofty towers, and a range of grey cloisters—now converted into dwelling-houses for maiden ladies—and a green, sunshiny Close, sprinkled with elm trees, and intersected with gravel walks, along which respectable children—none others—attended by nursemaids, were allowed to take their walks abroad. And there was a market-place with a stone cross in the middle, and a business street, full of shops where the country people bought their finery—red, yellow, blue, and all the colours of the rainbow; and a second street, very genteel and respectable, where Angusbury, select, purchased its moire antiques and Paris millinery. Also, there was a mild,

slumbrous river, the Lelland, which never made much noise in the world, and indeed seemed to exist only for the convenience of anglers, as mild and slumbrous as itself, who would sit through long summer days upon its reedy banks, never catching even the stupidest fish, but only getting a nibble now and then, to keep them from going to sleep altogether. Moreover Angusbury had a Mayor, a Corporation, a Board of Health, and a School of Art, which last was falling into decay, by reason of the incompetency of the master—an easy-going sort of man, who allowed the pupils to draw caricatures of him on the backs of their paper, while he sat in his private room smoking, just opening the door now and then, and giving a mild glance around, to the intent they might not lapse into flagrant disorder. But

the Committee was going to alter all that. The master had received his dismissal; the school was to be remodelled, turned inside out and upside down, and made the admiration of the surrounding district, for order, method, and regularity. To this end a new master had been engaged, of whom more anon.

These were the prominent features of Angusbury. There was nothing else remarkable about the place. It lived its little life with all due respectability. It paid its taxes and water-rates—though sometimes, in consequence of small dividends, or a fall in the funds, they were not forthcoming the first time of asking. It attended a place of worship regularly on Sundays. Its very genteel people went to the abbey, where there was an intoned service, and a great array of hooded dignitaries;

the rest went to a district church, where a good evangelical clergyman preached; or to the primitive methodist chapel, whose pulpit was supplied once a month by a minister from Millsmany, and at other times by "local brethren" resident in Angusbury. It learned its catechism, and to a certain extent practised what it learned. At any rate, it kept its hands from picking and stealing, for the magistrate had scarcely anything to do, and the police were men of abundant leisure, which they spent in mild, undisturbed flirtation at the tops of area steps. It did not always keep its tongue from lying and evil-speaking, but then no towns do that, especially those in which, according to census returns, the population consists chiefly of—but there is no need to bring that subject forward again. On the

whole, Angusbury was a very respectable place—a place of which none of its inhabitants need be ashamed.

Something like a moderately talented, *very* moderately talented young lady, who has been sent to boarding-school from her earliest years, and carefully trained and taught to behave herself quietly, after the manner of the sixpenny good-breeding books—not to talk loud, not to laugh loud, not to walk fast in the streets, not to look into the shop windows, not to flirt with individuals of the opposite sex, not to say anything remarkable, or do anything out of the ordinary beaten track of commonplace propriety; but just to sit still and hold herself up, and speak when she is spoken to, and, in short, live as if the eye of an invisible school-mistress were ever glowering down

upon her, and keeping watch with Argus-like vigilance over her manners and customs.

That is a tolerably correct portrait of a certain second-rate provincial town entered in the parish register and county chronicles as the "ancient borough of St. Angusbury-cum-Monklands."

CHAPTER III.

AND all this time Nils Brayton and Hester Tredegar have been plodding through the April gloom over that most dreary road which lay between Lellandsbridge and the old house at Milcote.

Dreary enough at any time—at least, that part of it before you come to Milcote Lane, with its monotonous hedgerows and level fields, only diversified at intervals of twenty or thirty yards by a gaunt, spectre-like tree, stretching its great black arms upon the sky; or a charred and trodden-down patch upon the stunted grass, left by

some gipsies when they struck their tents and moved their encampment farther away from the town. But surely never so dreary as on this April night, when neither moon nor stars were out; and the east wind came moaning across the Angusbury flats like a very spirit of dismal discontent, which the half-fledged trees, as their branches chafed and fretted together, seemed to answer in a murmur as dismal and discontented.

Yet the way did not seem long to either of them, for it was beguiled by those pleasant thoughts which make even the dreariest road seem bright as with summer sunshine; thoughts to which that moonless, starless night could give none of its gloom, and that wailing east wind none of its discontent.

Once only before had Hester been on that Milcote road alone at night, and that was a long time ago, when May was at home—May who had been away in France more than two years now. It was one day towards the close of January, yet not much bleaker and darker than this. Nils Brayton had been sent for up to London on some business connected with the War Department—he was often summoned away at a moment's notice—and Hester had gone over to Lellandsbank, to sit with Mrs. Brayton, who was suffering with an illness which required careful nursing. Hester waited upon her whilst Martha Bennet, the old housekeeper, lay down to rest a little while; and then she had had to walk home alone in the moonlight. She remembered that walk very well: how the creaking of the bare

branches overhead had made her shudder and hurry forward; how every harmless stump had seemed like some prowling thief or vagabond who might spring upon her, demanding her money or her life; how the silver moonlight, shining upon a heap of broken stones, transformed it into a company of gipsies, to avoid whom she had turned down a by-road, which led her at least a mile out of her way.

Poor Hester! But now all was very different. With Nils Brayton walking by her side, she felt so safe. Not all the vagabonds and gipsies in the kingdom could harm her whilst she could hear the regular tramp of that firm footstep close at hand. This sense of being protected and cared for was very pleasant to Hester. It was a feeling that she rarely knew in that cold,

quiet home life of hers. Mr. Tredegar, self-contained, reserved, and unsociable, never let her know, by tender caress or thoughtful word, that her welfare was dear to him, that her happiness lay very near his heart. Certainly he was a very upright, honourable man; thank God, she had no need to blush for him or for his actions; but he lived his own life, apart from love or sympathy, and it never seemed to enter his thoughts that she could need either. And then, for that little May, whose "coming home to stay always" was such a bright spot in the otherwise unsunned future of the year, Hester's love for May was that of a mother rather than a sister. Giving much, nay, giving all, she never asked for return. To care for others, and not to be greatly cared for by them, this seemed to be her life

duty. Not so now. For a little while she had fallen into her own place. There came into her heart, not for the first time, the thought how pleasant it must be to have someone always stronger, steadier, and wiser than herself—someone who would lead her through the whole long journey of life, as Mr. Brayton was leading her now along that dark, comfortless road, quite safely.

It was a silent walk; Mr. Brayton did not seem disposed to talk much. It was enough to know that Hester was by his side, that he need but move his hand to touch hers, so near it was, so close to his own, just where he hoped it might always be; that he need but turn to look down into her face—that quiet, unpassionate face, change-ful, but not restless, and lighted up now as from some pleasant thought within. Just

the face that a man, somewhat disappointed with what the world had already given him, might like to have at his own fireside day by day, year by year, all through life. And, perhaps, as they walked along, Nils Brayton, who in general had not much leisure for castle-building, let his thoughts drift on to the time when he should be rich enough to take that hand in his own, and keep it there—rich enough to transplant his favourite flower from the shadow which folded it so closely now, to a warm, genial spot, where the sun should shine on it by day, and the dew refresh it by night, and no storms beat upon it any more. A year or two, not more than that, and the time would come.

So they walked on in silence, and he never told her the thought that lay so

near his heart. He never told her that she was the woman he had chosen out of all the world to be his own. Perhaps if he had, life would have been a very different thing for both of them. Wanting only that steady, quiet love which he could have given her, knowing but little of her own heart, how deeply it might be stirred, how entirely it could suffer or enjoy, she would have given him all he asked, and, as the dear old-fashioned story-books say, they would have been "very happy ever afterwards."

But the affairs of these two people were not to be settled after the manner of the dear old-fashioned story-books. In quite another manner, not nearly so smooth and pleasant, their life course was to run. The great Father who says

to some, "Rest, and be thankful," said to them, "Suffer, and be strong."

They came to the gate, overhung by two great spreading sycamore trees, which led into Milcote garden. Hester knew well enough that the most unkind thing that she could do for her father would be to call him down from his study for half an hour's friendly chat with a visitor. And Nils Brayton, knowing Mr. Tredegar for a silent, unapproachable sort of man, did not offer to go further than the gate. He shook hands with her there, said in his usual matter-of-fact way—

"If you should ever want any more leaves for your drawing, you must let me know. I shall always be glad to get them for you."

And then he went home again and set-

tled down to a three hours' spell of writing; the price he had to pay for those ivy sprays which Hester was even now placing so carefully in a glass of water, that their freshness might be unspoiled when next morning she took them to the School of Art.

Mrs. Brayton, who was still sitting by the fire with her knitting work, often lifted her eyes for a long, loving, motherly look at her son as he sat at his desk writing patiently on until after the stroke of midnight. You may do the same if you like, for Nils Brayton is a man that will bear looking at.

He may be thirty, or he may be more than that. Fifty years leave upon some men's faces lines not so marked as his wears now. It is the face of a man who has

had to fight much, not with outward trouble and disappointment, though he has had his share of these too, but with enemies within—with strong passions and a mighty will, to conquer which makes any man's life a sore conflict. Nils Brayton has not lived easily, to wear at thirty a face like that which his mother looks upon now with such perfect content—such unquestioning, trustful love. He may have sinned deeply—men of his sort often do; but if so, he has repented bitterly, for there is a grave humility in his bearing, not the habitual slouch of outworn penitence, but the sad, yet lofty dignity of a man who knows that there are sins for which no repentance can atone, and whose memory no after life, be it ever so pure and perfect, can wash out.

It may be that this long past tempest has cleared the air. This stormy wind, however and whenever it arose, may have been but as a messenger fulfilling His word, who will have all men's lives to be honest and true. Be that as it may, no one in Angsbury can speak a word against Nils Brayton now. He walks its streets, erect, with steady, straightforward glance, which seems, in its quiet fearlessness, to dare accusation or reproach. The whole town knows him for an honest man—a true gentleman. His mother—and surely she has the best right to speak—says very proudly,

“There is not a better son in the world, nor more dutiful, than my Nils.”

And she thanks God for it, as well she may.

People who know much about such things,

tell us that the ashes and lava which gush from a burning volcano, though they may scorch for awhile, do yet afterwards greatly enrich the fields over which they poured so angrily. And when years have gone by, the grass will spring more greenly, and the trees put forth braver blossoms, because of the fiery rain which long ago fed the soil at their roots. But maybe some unthinking peasant girl, who knew not of any volcano, stood too near when its angry breath came forth; and it scorched the young life out of her, and blackened the cheeks that were so blooming, and left her dead. What is it to her that by-and-by the grass will be greener and the flowers more bright? What to her that the trees will put forth stronger boughs, and wear a rosier veil of blossom? She will look upon them no

more. Her little day is done. The lava stream has killed her. Will she live again, as the flowers do?

CHAPTER IV.

TRUE to their lady-love, the clouds all followed the moon, as she dipped behind the rugged outline of the Monk's Crag; and the April sun rose next morning upon a stainless sky. It made the birds sing out right merrily amongst the opening leaves; it made old Margaret, the Milcote housekeeper—a genuine, true-hearted Methodist—tune up with unwonted vigour, and sing—

“Awake, my soul, and with the sun
Thy daily stage of duty run,”

as she fried the ham for her master's

breakfast ; it even stirred up Sally, the housemaid, who had no voice for singing, and caused her to whistle, not unmelodiously, as she polished the casement window of the parlour—that low latticed casement through which she looked out upon such a wealth of primroses, and violets, and all manner of sweet Spring flowers.

You do not know Milcote yet, so you had better step out of doors, and, leaning your arms over that gate at which Nils Brayton and Hester parted last night, take a leisurely survey of the place in this sunny April morning.

It was a pleasant, rambling, old-fashioned country-house, standing far back in a garden equally old-fashioned, and rambling, and pleasant. A garden which brought forth cabbage-roses, and Canterbury bells,

and sweet-Williams, and clove-pinks, and marigolds, and huge bunches of white and purple lilac—a garden where there were no Italian flower-beds, no fancy baskets, no antique vases stuck over with scarlet geraniums—no anything, in fact, but the rich greenness and luxuriance, and mingled shade and sunshine, which, of old established right and custom, belong to a country garden.

As for the house, the outside of it matched the garden, being grown over with a sweet tracery work of Virginian creeper, woodbine, and jasmine, through which small latticed windows peered out into the greenness and beauty beyond. Going into that house, you would naturally have expected to find everything very cozy and comfortable; plenty of easy chairs, plenty

of soft cushions, plenty of primitive old dimity-covered sofas, with such accommodating sides and backs!—plenty of everything to make life easy and enjoyable. If so, you would have been completely mistaken. Not that Milcote lacked comfort—nothing of the sort. But it was a stern military sort of comfort, not at all dependent on easy chairs and soft cushions, rather, indeed, discarding them as effeminate and useless.

Mr. Tredegar was a half-pay officer, who had lived most of his life abroad under rigid army discipline. Its rigour and self-denial had somehow worked themselves into the fabric of his daily domestic habits; and he would no more have thought of lounging back in his chair, or disposing his tall stately form on a sofa unless compelled thereto by illness, than a very Pusey-

ish young lady would indulge herself with cold chicken on Lent Fridays, or a private breakfast before matins. No, Milcote was sparsely, almost scantily, furnished ; and what little elegance it did possess, was chiefly owing to Hester's tasteful fingers. Hester, who filled the broad low window-seat with flowers, and hung her favourite pictures here and there upon the walls, and dotted little bits of bright-coloured fancy work about the rooms, which relieved the monotony of the general effect, like a scarlet cloak upon a grey, misty landscape.

But Sally, as she marched about with her broom and duster, would have whistled just as melodiously whether the furniture had been *ormolu* or American deal, whether the morning had been April or November.

Sally's sturdy, broad-built frame, and uniformly red face, and round, unmeditative eyes, proclaimed her one of the happy many upon whom atmospheric causes produce but little effect; who can meet with equal composure the fogs of autumn and the sunshine of spring. Her happiness, too, the wellspring whence gurgled that robust trill, was quite independent this morning of external influences.

Sally was engaged to be married to Thomas Bilson, the young man who served Milcote with its daily supply of milk. And this evening, Wednesday, being Margaret's class-night, Thomas was allowed to come and spend an hour or two with his lady-love by the vacant kitchen hearth, "snug and comfortable, just for all the world like real quality," as Thomas expressed it; or,

perhaps, if Thomas had been competent to make a comparison, a great deal snugger and more comfortable than "real quality," who, if they have the warm fire, and the vacant hearth, and the uninterrupted leisure, do sometimes lack that faithful, unquestioning love, which made young Bilson's heart beat so cheerily, as he clinked his milk-pails down Milcote lane that sunny April morning.

This, and not any bloom of violets and primroses, seen through lattice windows, caused Sally to whistle so melodiously amongst her brooms and dusters; this it was which spread over her honest red face a smile of such ample, leisurely content. Sally had been engaged, or, as she termed it, had "fastened herself," a year come Martinmas, and Thomas thought they might as well

make matters up, and get to housekeeping in June or July, which was the time when his present employer contemplated retiring from the milk business. He had already taken a cottage at half-a-crown a week, rent to commence from the first week in June, and he had got a few little things looked up in the way of furniture, which were packed up now in a corner of the best room at home. A couple of cane-bottomed chairs, with carved backs, second-hand; a pair of tall brass candlesticks, which he had picked up cheap in Angusbury market; some Italian banditti and shepherdesses in coloured pot, for chimney ornaments, and a tea-tray, with a peacock as large as life, and much handsomer than life, painted in the middle.

Not much towards housekeeping, certainly,

but enough to make Tom's face brighten considerably, as he leaned his back against the best room door, and surveyed his treasures neatly packed up in the corner. And sometimes, when he had an hour to spare after work, he would move the tea-tray into different positions, to see where the peacock showed to most advantage, and he would place the shepherdesses and Italian banditti in a row on the chimney-piece, and then he would draw out the cane-bottomed chairs in front of the fireplace, and seating himself on one, would make-believe that Sally's stout, robust figure occupied the other; just as really would be the case when they were married, and settled in the milk business next June.

Thomas, like his bride-elect, did not possess a naturally brilliant creative faculty,

and therefore, when indulging in contemplations of future happiness, he found it necessary to aid his imagination by something that could be actually taken hold of and realised. The empty chair, and the pot shepherdesses, and the Italian banditti, were a species of object lesson, an outward and visible sign of an invisible idea, which, without such visible sign, could not have been made patent to his mind. Had Thomas been a poetic young man, he would doubtless have shut his eyes and beheld the whole thing complete, without object lesson or external symbol; just as an artist sees his picture before he begins to paint it, or the dramatist his scenes and characters before a word of the play has been written. Lacking the creative faculty, however, it was well to have recourse to external sym-

bolts; and Thomas might perhaps make a steadier husband by reason of that very obtuseness of mental perception which compelled him to use them.

Sally, for her part, was not at all unwilling to speed the happy day, and become Mrs. Bilson, junior. Sally was not romantic. She had never read a novel in her life, and never meant to do so. She knew nothing about lovers' quarrels and sweet reconciliations. She was not a person who had any foolish notions about being "long sought and hardly won." For her own part, whatever silly, foolish young women might say about it, she could not see any common sense in playing with a follower as a cat plays with a mouse, pretending not to know whether she wanted to have him or not, letting him run away and then running

after him again, perhaps in the end letting him run away altogether, an unexpected and not at all pleasant termination of the game, though one which served the player quite right. Sally was thankful to say she had not behaved in any such ridiculous off-and-on, fast-and-loose way, when Thomas, bless him! as decent and respectable a young man as any you could find in all the country round, to say nothing of a trifle in the bank, and the best of characters from his master, came to her that Monday night, a year ago come next Martinmas, just as she was putting the "starch things" in to steep in the back-kitchen, and told her that he had been thinking this long time past that they might as well put their little earnings together, and set up on their own account in the milk business.

Sally had heard the Milcote clergyman say at church, "He that getteth a wife getteth a good thing;" and it was her own private opinion that a woman who got a sober, steady, respectable husband, got something quite as good, if not a little better. And so, instead of blushing, and simpering, and looking foolish, as some servants she knew would have done, she just went on soaping Mr. Tredegar's collars, and dropping them one by one into the tub, and when the last was safely under water, she said,

"Yes, Tom, I don't know but what I'm agreeable, if you are."

And she had kept to it ever since, and meant to keep to it always. For she was quite sure she shouldn't meet with anyone handier than Thomas, bless him!—such a good lad to his mother, and regular at

church, and a pledged 'totaller, and everything else that was proper. And so as soon as Miss Hester was comfortably suited with a fresh girl, Sally meant to go home and get herself a few new clothes made, preparatory to taking Thomas for better for worse. So that Sally's future was bright enough, and she had good need to whistle merrily as she did over the sweeping and dusting of the Milcote parlour that sunshiny April morning.

Hester came downstairs and took her place at the breakfast-table. Mr. Tredegar was already there with his London paper. He always got through his newspaper during breakfast, and then the remainder of the day was at liberty for study or reading, which, according to his ideas, seemed to comprise the whole duty of man.

Mr. Tredegar was not naturally an unpleasant man. On the contrary, he was well-read and very intelligent, and had seen much of the world in his earlier days. Until ten years ago, when his wife died, he had lived abroad with his regiment; but when he became a widower, having fulfilled his term of service, he returned to England, and ever since had lived a retired, studious life.

Five years out of the ten had been spent at Angusbury. They brought no introductions with them, and consequently none of the upper-class people left cards. It was not until many months after his arrival, when the place had perfectly assured itself of his respectability, that a few stray callers found their way to the old-fashioned house at Milcote; and then he had become

so wedded to what was at first unintentional retirement, that he did not care to re-enter society, or take upon himself its duties and obligations. He liked that quiet, undisturbed life, it suited both his tastes and his means. He was too old now to care for gaiety; and the Angusbury people were not, in a general way, remarkable for intellect or information. It was pleasanter to sit over his maps and plans, than to listen to their babbling small talk. Besides, there was a quiet little undercurrent of selfishness in his nature, mingled with a lack of perception which made him fail to discover that the life which they led at Milcote, though suitable enough for a middle-aged man, who had already got out of the world most of the good that it could give, was far from being wholesome for his young daughter,

whose life yet lay before her. It never occurred to him that she could not breathe as freely as he did in that dull, unchanging atmosphere.

But Hester was not given to complaining. She made the most of the scant breathing room which was given her. Childhood passed, school-days gone, she settled down into the peaceful routine of almost solitary home life, having no heroic notions of sacrifice or self-denial connected therewith; not even knowing why she sometimes felt so weary and listless. She did her little best where God had placed her; and if sometimes, when she heard other girls—as she sometimes did hear them at the School of Art—talk of their pleasure-parties, balls, gipsyings, and the like, the question asked itself, “Why are none of these for me?” she

remembered that life might have been sadder, and was content.

Then she was painfully shy and retiring. She had not the happy art of making friends. She felt awkward and embarrassed when one or two of the more sociably disposed girls at the school had come up to her and spoken kindly to her, and asked her to join them in their walks. She would like to have gone. She felt it was so kind of them to ask her, but she could find no words to tell them so. Instead of meeting their advances with the smiling welcome which, indeed, was in her heart, she faltered and hesitated, and then they said one to another,

“Poor girl! She is certainly very clever, but then she is so shy. It is no use trying to get on with her; we must just let her alone.”

And after that they did let her alone.

So that Hester had lived in Angusbury five years, ever since she was eighteen, without making any friends, except Mrs. Brayton and Miss Lapiter. We have seen a little of Mrs. Brayton already. She was one of the very few who called upon the Milcote people when they came to Angusbury; and the friendship begun through courtesy had been continued through genuine respect on both sides.

Mrs. Brayton's influence over Hester, so far as she exerted any, was wholesome. She was pure-minded and dignified, kind and courteous in all her ways; a true gentlewoman of the old stamp, with moreover a certain decision of character about her, which, descending to her son Nils, had

strengthened into downright decision and firmness.

Hester's other friend presented a complete contrast to the high-bred mistress of Lel-landsbank. Miss Lapiter, of Rose Cottage, was one of the merriest, funniest, most talkative and loveable of maiden ladies; a perennial spring of mirth and good temper; a notable example of single blessedness; a standing proof of the happiness which may be attained in the much-maligned state of spinsterhood. For if there ever was a woman who lived in the sunshine, who absorbed it into her very face, from which it seemed to ray out in perpetual smiles, that woman was Esther Lapiter, daughter of Isaac Lapiter, M.D., and sister of the late Rev. Josiah Lapiter, Rector of St. Angusbury-cum-Monkland.

Miss Lapiter was an indefatigable Missionary collector. She gathered up more than all the other ladies of the committee put together. Not out of pure zeal for the cause—though she did love it to a certain extent, and often denied herself some useless adornment in the way of dress, or went without a favourite table luxury that she might have wherewithal to minister to the necessities of those who were less favoured than herself—but the secret of Miss Lapiter's devotion to Missionary collecting was, that it gave her an opportunity of seeking out and being kind to strangers and recent comers, who seemed to be neglected by the Angusbury people. That little red collecting book, with the rector's autograph warrant on the back of it, was a sufficient excuse for visits which might otherwise have ap-

peared needless or intrusive. More than once had it opened the way to pleasant and lasting friendships. Many a solitary old maid, plodding on through a sort of slow death-in-life in some of the lower strata of the Angusbury "deposit of gentlewomen," blessed that little red collecting book, on the strength of which Miss Lapiter had paid her first visit to their secluded habitations, convincing them that they had not quite outlived a place in the memories of their fellow-creatures. Many a widow lady of small means and few friends, who had come to Angusbury with no introductions, and was therefore treated with polite neglect by the leading representatives of respectability, looked back upon Miss Lapiter's collecting book as the beginning of brighter times and improved social opportunities, the har-

binger of cosy afternoon calls and delightful little evenings at Rose Cottage; evenings which seemed to bring a warm, fresh burst of sunshine into their hitherto monotonous lives.

And it was that same red collecting book—a veritable home missionary amongst the abodes of social need—which gave the kind-hearted maiden lady an excuse for trotting down to Milcote one summer afternoon, not long after the Tredegars had taken up their abode there. She had had the family on her mind for sometime. From divers little external signs, her quick perception had gathered that the life lived in that quiet home was not of the sunniest or the brightest. She had noticed Hester walking out alone, looking listless and dispirited, as well she might, for the walks in the immediate neigh-

bourhood of Angusbury were anything but exhilarating, unless taken in connection with a lively conversational companion. She had watched her sometimes coming out of the School of Art, still alone—always alone—whilst the other girls clustered together in twos and threes, arranging pleasure-parties and excursions together, and her heart had been sad for the poor motherless girl, in whom none seemed to take any interest. She longed to put a little sunshine into her quiet life, to brighten up that listless face with some of the joyful content which overflowed her own. And with that benevolent purpose in her heart, and with the red collecting book, and a peace offering of summer flowers in her hands, she paid the first voluntary visit that ever had been paid by Angusbury to the Milcote people.

The peace offering and the collecting book were not in vain. Both Miss Lapiter's arrows hit the mark. "The cause" gained an annual guinea, and Hester Tredegar one of the kindest, best, most faithful of friends. If Hester had only known how much that visit would involve,—how strangely that little thread, put in, as it were, by the merest accident, would mingle itself with the warp and woof of her whole life. But she did not know. She took the little golden thread, and was thankful for it.

Miss Lapiter had a kind word and a pleasant smile for every one who came within the reach of either. She believed it was her mission to make people happy, in a quiet, unostentatious way; and surely no mission was ever performed with such hearty good will, or with such successful results.

That benevolence of hers overflowed in a perennial stream of loving deeds and little words of kindness. When the women in her tract district got into trouble, if their husbands took wrong courses, or their daughters turned out giddy, or their sons developed a taste for the public-house, they used to come to Miss Lapiter for advice. And though she never dealt in lengthy exhortations, or treated them to a cold shower-bath of lofty moral precepts, when the poor things wanted a little womanly sympathy, yet she had always at command a fund of thorough good sense and practical wisdom, which met the case, and sent the women home with, as they expressed it, "a load off their minds."

Miss Lapiter was well known to the juvenile population of Angusbury. The

widest current of her good-will flowed towards the little people. She could never see a child fall in the street without running to pick it up, and dropping a sugar-plum or a lozenge into its fat, dirty little palm, and dismissing it with a hearty "Now go home, darling, and tell mother all about it," which the disobedient young reprobate never did, but, instead, revealed the matter to its brood of acquaintance, so that, in progress of time, when Miss Lapiter's benevolent tendencies became generally known, the boys and girls used to be on the watch, and as soon as a certain Dunstable bonnet and green parasol were caught sight of in the distance, first one and then another designing urchin would run out, tumble into the road, and set up a dismal wail, which, so surely as Miss Lapiter heard it, was

quieted by some sweet morsel from that inexhaustible pocket of hers. And if the dear old lady was sometimes imposed upon, as her friends now and then hinted to her, was it not better to be cheated out of even entire pennyworths of mint lozenges, than to let one case of genuine distress pass unrelieved?

Generous, merciful Miss Lapiter! If all maiden ladies, yes, and all married ladies, too, had as tender a heart, and as kind a tongue, as the mistress of Rose Cottage, society would need less reformation than it cries out for now.

These two, then, an elderly maiden lady, and a very elderly widow lady, formed Hester's "circle" of acquaintance. For Nils Brayton, who came to Milcote only at very rare intervals, and in whose presence she

always felt a certain quiet restraint, could scarcely be said to make a third upon the list. A very small circle, though Hester did her best to be contented with it. Indeed, had she been ever so discontented, that would not have bettered the state of the case, for Mr. Tredegear neither sought nor wished for new friends, and the time had long gone by when people could be expected to call upon them as recent comers; and we have already seen with what success Hester's more sociably inclined fellow-students at the School of Art had tried to make their way through that veil of painful reserve, which was so untrue an index to the faithful loving heart within.

But these things would not be always so. Only until July—and already the primroses and violets had begun to bloom in

Milcote garden—only until July; then May was coming home—the little pet sister May, who would make everything so different, who would fill that home, so quiet and gloomy hitherto, with joy and sunshine, with laughter and music. For wherever May came, there came with her, as surely as roses with the summer time, a never-failing store of gladness.

And so, when Hester's heart was sad, and the days went drearily on, neither spring nor freshness in them, and life seemed little worth, its pleasures so scant, its duties so mean and poor, she would look onward to the merry midsummer time, not far off now, and still each half murmuring thought with these sweet words—

“When May comes home.”

CHAPTER V.

BREAKFAST over, Mr. Tredegar retired to his study, and, after attending to such household arrangements as the tiny Milcote establishment required at her hands, Hester gathered up those precious ivy leaves, and went to the School of Art; for this was drawing day, one of her few bright opportunities.

The Angusbury School of Art was a quaint old building in the Close, formerly part of the abbey, under whose shadow it stood. Indeed, it was so near to the abbey, that, as you stood within its grey portals, you

could hear the jackdaws cawing in the belfry tower, or listen to the clear voices of the choristers, intoning morning and evening prayers. For Angusbury—at least the genteel part of it—was very High Church, and did not, in a general way, approve of private domestic altars. It liked better to perform its daily devotions in public, with the legitimate accompaniment of stoles and surplices and college hoods.

The external aspect of the building was uninviting enough. For five centuries those old walls had battled with storm and damp; and now they bore traces of the fight in many a patch and scar. Here was a buttress of red brick, there a fragment of stone facing; now a fine specimen of dog's tooth moulding round an old archway; then a bare piece of lath and plaster

work; next a Gothic window, fair as any the abbey could boast; and near it a rude mass of masonry, thrust in to hold up some failing corner or faulty beam. Within, however, all was graceful and classic. Stepping out of the grim shadowy Close, with its cloisters and tithe barns and mouldy monkish remains, you found yourself transported to a new world, or, rather, to the old fabled worlds of Greece and Rome.

It was a long room, with a recessed compartment at each end. In one of these compartments were ranged casts from the ancient sculptures. There stood Apollo, with outstretched hand and lofty front; next him a laughing Faun; then bearded Hercules; then a Jupiter, stern and terrible as his own thunderbolts; and, side by side with him, Minerva peered with grave, still pa-

tience into the face of a very slow youth, who, for more than two thousand years, had been trying to extract a thorn from his foot, but without success. Then came Ceres with her chaplet of grain; then poor Niobe, mourning for her lost ones; and next to her, Juno, stately and imperial, looking so scornfully down on the clusters of modern young ladies, who, with the largest of crinolines and smallest of fancy hats, used to chat and gossip over their easels almost within arm's length of her marble dignity. The centre of the room was devoted to the younger pupils, and furnished with outlines, elementary subjects, and geometrical studies. Passing these, you came to a second recessed compartment, separated from the younger pupils' desk by a crimson curtain. Here were grouped fragments from old

Greek capitals, scrolls, clusters of fruit and flowers, medallions, shields, and casts of friezes from the Parthenon.

It was to this end that Hester came with her ivy leaves; for here the “naturals,” as Mr. Bilson called the girls who copied leaves and flowers, used to study. Mr. Bilson, Sally’s future father-in-law, was already there, getting out the boards, sharpening chinks, arranging easels, and attending to other little matters, before the business of the class commenced.

Mr. Bilson was a small man—small both in body and mind—sixty, or thereabouts, but active and nimble as a squirrel. He had a large share of self-esteem, which was more comfortable for himself than for other people; and having been for the last ten years employed by the committee to

sharpen chinks, and wait upon the pupils, he considered himself a competent judge in matters of art. He was, as he expressed it, "considerable partial" to Miss Tredegar, not only because she was one of the most advanced pupils in the school, but because, with a benevolence and consideration which are not always exercised by mistresses of households, she had facilitated the acquaintance of his son Thomas with the Milcote maiden, and so secured to himself the possession of an active, willing daughter-in-law. He was just arranging Hester's easel, when she came in with the ivy leaves.

"Oh, Miss,"—and Mr. Bilson put up his hand to an imaginary lock of grey hair on the top of his forehead, by way of salute—"you've brought them there for the *grope*.

I was just sayin' to myself, as I settled the palette and brushes, as how that grope of yours wanted a few ivy leaves or something to stick in somewheres. You see, Miss, havin' been so long in the concern, I kind o' knows a good deal about these sort o' things. I lay you'll like me to fetch a glass of water for 'em, Miss. They're uncommon pretty."

"Thank you, Bilson, if you don't mind the trouble, I should be obliged to you. Shall you have time before the class begins?"

"Yes—yes, Miss;" and Mr. Bilson tossed his head rather independently. "You see, it's here, Miss. Having been so long in the concern, the committee aren't particular with me about time. I goes out, and I comes in, and they don't take no notice. It's a

good bit past beginning now, I reckon," and Mr. Bilson climbed a form from which he could command a view of the abbey clock, "and nobody's handed up but a few childer. I've set 'em to work yonder," continued Mr. Bilson, nodding towards the centre of the room, where about half a dozen girls, of ten or twelve years of age, were labouring away at elementary outlines. "The young ladies has come badly of late, very, exceptin' yourself, which follers art for the love of it, and that makes a difference. But they'll start fresh when the new master comes. Law! this 'ere school won't be like the same place when the new master comes. You don't happen to have seen him, do you, Miss?"

"No Bilson, I have not. I did not know he was in Angusbury now." And Hester

began to arrange the leaves, rather wishing that Bilson would go away and leave her in peace. But Mr. Bilson, leaning against a Corinthian capital, and sharpening a chalk pencil, appeared to have no intention of the sort. It was a harmless weakness of his, this love of a little gossip with the students; and having, as he expressed it, "been so long in the concern," and being in some sort a useful adjunct to it, they used to indulge him now and then.

"I don't know as he has come, Miss, for good, but I've heard tell of a fresh gentleman being seen at church last Sunday, and I don't make no doubt but it's himself, just comed through to give an eye to the place afore he settles in it. They say he's going to give special heed to this here class, and

make it such as there isn't no other class to ekal it."

Hester went on arranging her leaves in silence, and Mr. Bilson lowered his voice, for another of the young ladies had just taken her place at that end of the room.

"Now, Miss, that there young lady," continued Mr. Bilson, jerking his elbow in the direction of the new comer, "that there young lady don't show herself here more than once a fortnight; no, nor hasn't done this six months past. It's a month now since I gived her out a fresh chalk, and says she to me when I gived her it, 'Mr. Bilson,' says she, 'I'm afraid you think I am a very idle girl.' Girl indeed!" and Mr. Bilson looked facetious, "she'll none see the bright side o' nine and thirty again. Why, Miss, she used to come to my shop, when I were in the fancy chalk line

twelve years ago, afore I took to this concern, and she wasn't to call young then. It's queer, it is, the way the Angusbury ladies tries to make themselves seem younger than what they are. But it's nature, I suppose—that's what it is. I never makes no secret of telling that I'm going in sixty—no, nor never did. But, Miss, that was a beautiful business I used to do when I was in the fancy chalk line, twelve year back. The young ladies all used to come to me; I had something pretty to say to 'em, bless 'em! They're funny things, is young ladies. There's nothing catches 'em like a compliment, put in neat. You see I was sharp at a compliment—that was where it was. It was pounds and pounds into my pocket, was being sharp at a compliment."

"Not as I would do it to you, Miss," said

Mr. Bilson with respectful sagacity, "because you aren't one of them sort that can be took with such things; but most young ladies as I ever see, is. And when one of 'em came and wanted a pink chalk, I used to say, "It's to match your cheeks, Miss; no, I haven't none pretty enough;" and, bless you, she used to look as pleased, you can't think how pleased she used to look. And then maybe another would come for a pearl white, and I used to get out the drawer that had 'em in, and tell her she mustn't put her hands over near, or the chalks would lose colour beside 'em. And didn't she smile and say, 'Oh! Mr. Bilson, you're such a funny man!' And she'd have given me eighteenpence, Miss, for that chalk, sooner than she'd have paid twopence for it to a man that couldn't put in a compliment along with it,

tidy and neat. Oh! but it was a beautiful business that I did in fancy chalks, twelve years back!"

Whilst little Mr. Bilson was holding forth on his previous achievements, Hester had been making a study of the leaves on a sheet of blank paper. She found now that she wanted a different spray to balance the other side. Bilson rolled up a bit of paper, as he had seen the master do sometimes, and carefully considered the picture through it. Mr. Bilson was very fond of doing anything that made him look professional.

"Now, Miss, I should say"—he had a great habit of commencing his remarks by "I should say," always jerking his elbow in the direction of the object he was contemplating—"Now, Miss, I should say as a

bit of fern-leaf would be just the thing for that there side, to make 'em match; a bit of oak fern, that nice little lady-like sort, if you could happen of it, or even the best kind o' bracken."

Hester had been thinking the same herself, but she was too kind to take the merit of originality from the little man.

"A very good thought, Mr. Bilson. Yes, a spray of fern would balance this side nicely."

"It would, Miss. I always had an eye for form, and that sort of thing. The master that's going—and he's a sensible man, Miss, after all, is the master that's going—he used to say that there never was a man knowed better than me what was proper. I often used to give him an idea, I did. Yes, Miss, you must have a bit o' fern for

that there side, and I'll tell you where you may get it."

"From Mr. Bates the nurseryman, I suppose you mean? I generally get my flower studies there."

"Bless you, no, Miss, nothing of the sort. Where's the use of givin' half-a-crown for a leaf, when you may get it for nothing, and a beautiful walk into the bargain, by going to the Monk's Crag?"

"The Monk's Crag? Oh! but that is such a long way off."

"Well, yes, it is, Miss, as you say, a long way off, and that's the worst of it. Now, if I'd been in the fancy chalk line, same as I was afore I took to this here concern, I'd have nipped off myself, ay, that I would, and welcome, Miss, and fetched you a bit in no time. But you see, there's

never a ha'porth of time for a fellow to get to himself now, what with the young ladies' class, and the young gentlemen's class, in the day time, and the boys and men as comes to be taught cheap of nights, one hasn't a chance to do anybody a kindness. I daresay, though, you could walk it in an hour, Miss, from Milcote, if you gived yourself to it to step out well."

"Yes, perhaps I could; but I have never seen any fern of that kind at the Monk's Crag, Bilson."

"It's there all the same, Miss, whether you've seed it or not. I don't suppose nobody's found it out, only me. But, you see, of summer evenings, when the class isn't agate, I takes a walk down to the Monk's Crag, and the keeper bein' a personal friend,

lets me in gratuitous for nothing, and I looks round for an hour or two, and havin', as you may say, an eye for the invisible beauties of nature, I sees a good many things as isn't suspected of common people. And I've seed this fern, too, as will be the very thing you want. I don't mind telling you, Miss, where it grows, but I don't want it made public, for, bein' a particular sort, it would soon be made away with, and I should be sorry to lose the sight of it, and it looks so pretty, flickering up its bonnie leaves betwixt and the blue sky. But you know the first gatekeeper's lodge, Miss, this side the toll?"

"Yes."

"Well, you must go in that way, and keep straight along, while you come to an elm tree with a crow's nest, just one, in

the top of it; and there's a road through the bracken that will bring you out at the big Monk's Crag. You know the big Monk's Crag?"

"Yes—by the hermit's cell."

Mr. Bilson looked facetious again.

"Ay; the same. All the young ladies about here knows the hermit's cell, though I don't think as there's much prayin' done in it now. It's a nice place for lovers though, all the same. Well, you mustn't stop there—and I don't suppose you'll want to, being alone, as you most likely will—but you must turn off to the left, and keep by a little bit of a brook with forget-me-nots and flag leaves, and that'll lead you to the little Monk's Crag; and you must climb that—an awkwardish piece of work, too. Dear me, but I do wish I'd

been in the fancy chalk line still, and I'd have gone with you ; and the fern grows right at the very top—betwixt and the blue sky."

"Thank you, Bilson. I will go this afternoon, if the weather keeps fine."

"It'll do that, Miss, sure enough. There's never no rain about when them little skirring white clouds is out—them, as you see, Miss, over the abbey towers, as if somebody had swept 'em up with a besom. And be sure you take plenty of paper, to lap it up in—soft paper, as will soak up water well, and hold it a good bit ; for there's nothing loses their freshness so soon as them genteel little ferns. And now, Miss, I'll go and fetch you that glass of water."

CHAPTER VI.

HESTER worked on steadily until the abbey clock gave the signal for leaving class. For more than half an hour though, before that time, the girls at the elementary desk had been yawning and playing with their pencils, undisturbed either by the master or Bilson; and the young ladies who were studying in the neighbourhood of Apollo and Juno had given themselves up to uncontrollable gossip, unmindful of the calm proud faces that looked down upon them.

She selected a few of the ivy leaves to

take home and mix with some moss for the vases in the parlour, the rest she left for Bilson to clear away. The time had not yet come when anything gathered by Nils Brayton's hand was too precious for other cherishing than her own. Then she hurried home, got luncheon, packed up a few biscuits in her little satchel, and, mindful of Bilson's injunction that the ferns should be "lapped" in plenty of damp paper, went to her papa's study for a supply.

Mr. Tredegar was sitting at the table before a pile of maps and diagrams.

"Papa, I am going to the Monk's Crag to get some ferns for my crayon drawing."

"All right, dear," said the head of the Milcote establishment, without lifting his eyes from the compasses with which he was

describing some lines for the projection of a map.

“And have you any paper that you can spare me?—old soft paper that will keep damp for a long time. Bilson told me I must have some to wrap the ferns in.”

A hand was lifted from the compasses, and extended in the direction of a heap of old newspapers, which lay in a corner of the room. Hester went, and drawing out one from the bottom of the heap, stuffed it into her satchel without looking to see what it was.

“I shall be away three or four hours, papa. You won't want me for anything?”

“All right, my dear. I hope you will enjoy it and come back safe.”

Hester could not help one little sigh as she shut the door after her. No—her papa never missed her. If she had said “I am going away for a week, a month, a year,” that grave face would have been turned towards her just as quietly, and the low deliberate voice would have said,

“All right, my dear. I hope you will enjoy it and come safe back.”

But she could not be sad any more when she got out into the open country, and felt the April wind blowing through her hair, and heard the song of the larks as they rose from the green corn-fields and carolled away far overhead in the cloudless sky—cloudless, at least, except for those “skirring” white films which Bilson said were the sure promise of sunshine. Still less could she be other than happy, when, having passed

the gatekeeper's cottage, she turned into the wood, blue over now with wild hyacinths, whose faint, sweet perfume drifted up to her with every breath of wind, and stooped to gather the little wood anemones which scattered their white petals, like a snow fall, at her feet, and plucked the great primroses which bloomed out so broad and brave among the purple violets.

Monk's Crag was the name given to a small estate of fifty or sixty acres, which had formerly belonged to one of the old Angsbury families. But the late owner, having reduced his patrimony by racing and gambling, sold it to a rich country squire, who converted it into a sort of pleasure-ground, to which people were admitted on the payment of a small sum to the gatekeeper. A legend was attached to it, as to most of

the old places in the neighbourhood of Angusbury. St. Angus, Prior of the abbey, weary of the toil and weight of conventual life, came hither, and, retiring to a rude cell hewn out from the rock, passed the remainder of his life in prayer and solitary meditation. The cell was there still, with a little altar and cross at one end ; but no prayers were said in it now, and no pilgrim turned aside, as in days of yore, to cross his brow with the holy water which bubbled up from the well of St. Angus.

Monk's Crag was a great place for picnics and pleasure-parties. There were green dells through the heart of the wood, shady, quiet, bosky dells, closed in with clasping boughs, soft with primroses and violets, perfumed in spring-time with many a tuft of

wild blue hyacinth, whose drooping bells never betrayed the lover's vows which had been whispered over them. There was a sheet of water, where, among little islets of fern and hazel, wild fowl sported, and on whose margin the white lilies grew so rank and close that a child might reach them. There were grottoes canopied with moss and lichen, rock paths tangled with tall bracken, over which you might climb to the edge of the crags, and then look out over the whole fair country round—past Angusbury Abbey towers, past the sleepy Lelland, away to the distant blue hills of Avonshire. And in spring time the place was white with May blossom, and in summer the wild roses made a glow in every shady place, and in autumn the sunlight came filtering down through mountain

ash and beech trees, stained brown and gold and crimson with the falling leaves. Truly the Monk's Crag was a pleasant place in autumn, summer, or the sweet spring time, as many a staid, happy Angsbury matron said, who remembered still how sweet one voice had sounded long ago beneath the shelter of its whispering trees.

Hester kept on, according to Mr. Bilson's directions, past the solitary crow's nest and the great Monk's Crag, by the little brook and winding woodland path, which led, after ten minutes following of it, to the steep and rugged rock, where grew the coveted fern. Mr. Bilson was right; there its delicate little leaves fluttered "betwixt and the blue sky," trembling with every breath of wind that swept down from the wooded heights beyond.

Mr. Bilson need not have been so afraid

of the public finding out and pillaging his treasure, for surely none but a rabid botanist or venturous schoolboy, intent on danger and mischief, would have climbed such a steep, briery ascent as Hester found herself compelled to struggle over before the prize could be gained. And even when she reached the flat table-land on the top of the crag, the fern was still beyond arm's reach, shaking its tiny fronds, as though in saucy defiance, on a perpendicular bit of rock, from which, as she very much feared, no skill of hers could bring them down.

She stood for a few minutes, looking vexed and disappointed. Then she tried to plant her feet on some of the rough points which projected from the crag. That was no use. Then she heaped together a few of the loose stones into a little hillock; but stand-

ing on the top of that, and stretching her utmost, the beautiful green leaves still waved provokingly just half a dozen inches above her reach. She was trying to contrive some fresh expedient, by which they might be reached, when a hand came gently over her shoulder, and before she had time to wonder whose it was, the coveted fern was detached from the rock and given to her.

Turning round, she found herself, not face to face with Nils Brayton, who was the first person she thought of, as likely to help her in her difficulty, but face to face with what the Angusbury lawyer's clerk would have called "a well-dressed party of prepossessing appearance"—in plain English, a quiet, gentlemanly man, who raised his cap slightly in reply to her glance of confused inquiry.

"I ought to apologise for startling you so,"

he said, "but I have been here most of the day sketching, and I watched you climbing this crag. I thought perhaps, if you were a stranger in the place, you might not know how dangerous this path is, and so I came to help you."

"You are very good," said Hester, the old painful shyness coming back upon her, and flushing all her face with a rosy colour, which this stranger, judging from the smile with which he looked upon it, thought pretty rather than otherwise; "but I am not a stranger. I have very often been here, though I never climbed this crag before. I was anxious to get this fern, for they say it grows nowhere but here."

"Indeed; then you are a botanist," and the gentleman glanced down to the satchel which Hester still carried on her arm.

"No, I am not. I don't understand anything about botany. I wanted it for a flower-piece that I am doing just now."

"Better still," said the gentleman. "It is much more sensible to copy these pretty things than to classify them. I am glad you are not a botanist. But you must take care of this, it will soon fade."

"Yes; I know that. I must wrap it in some damp paper. I have plenty ready. It was very kind of you to get it for me."

And then Hester began carefully to retrace her steps down the rude descent; no easy matter either—not so easy as the upward path had been. Besides, with this stranger criticising her movements, as she felt he was, she did not like to jump and spring over the rocks, in the fashion which would have been most convenient.

"Let me help you," he said. "It is not safe for you to go down alone."

With an easy self-possession which seemed to belong to everything he said or did, he took her little satchel and the fern, and then holding her hand, guided her down the rough and, in some places, dangerous rocks, until they reached smooth ground again. This was done without any unpleasant assumption of politeness, without any speechifying or compliment. She was weak; he was strong. She needed help; he could give it. That was all.

His very quietness began to put Hester at her ease. He seemed so perfectly master of his position; he could so exactly do and say the right thing in the right place. By the time they had reached the smooth level glade which led out from the Monk's Crag

to the margin of the lake, her shyness, at least so much of it as was painful, had gone away, and she felt glad rather than otherwise for this unexpected incident in her expedition. He was so courteous and chivalrous; even Hester's ideas, rather exalted as they were, of a thoroughly pleasant person, were beginning to be realized, as he gradually drew her out into conversation touching the beauty of the surrounding scenery; and she found herself telling him, with quite a new strange animation, about the places where the prettiest views could be got, and the high path at the other end of the wood from which might be seen not only the lake and the Monk's Crag, but Angusbury Abbey towers, and the distant Avonshire hills.

“This is where I have been sketching,”

he said, pointing to a little green knoll twenty yards away, where a camp stool and portfolio lay upon the grass. "And as you are fond of landscape scenery, perhaps you would like to see some of my pictures?"

And then, leading the way, he made a comfortable seat for her with his plaid, and opening his portfolio, showed her sketch after sketch. Not the poor unmeaning work of one who does it for pastime or a livelihood; these were real pictures, in which, with rough, apparently unlaboured strokes, he had got the true idea of what he wanted to describe. He soon discovered that Hester was no mean judge of art. Half shyly, but with fine perception, she began to speak to him of his work, unconsciously revealing in all she said the richness

and grace of her own mind. Indeed this very unconsciousness made the beauty which it revealed more beautiful.

"I like this landscape drawing," she said, after a while, "though I don't do much of it myself. At the School of Art we generally study from the antique, except a few pupils who are learning flower-painting."

"Then have you a School of Art in Angsbury?"

"Yes, a very good one. I don't mean, you know, that the pupils are so very clever, but we have such good copies to study from; and if we have the will to learn, I think there is plenty of opportunity to learn."

"And so you study flower-paintings there?"

"No, I do crayons now. I am making a design for a flower-stand. I like designing

so much better than copying. I want this fern leaf just to give shade to a scroll on one side. I must go home with it now, or it will begin to fade."

And then she took out the newspaper which she had brought to wrap it in. That paper carried her thoughts back to the study, where her papa sat in the midst of his maps and diagrams. What a different picture, that gloomy study, with its air of comfortless absorption, from this sunny green knoll, where she sat now, with the beechen boughs bending over her head, the water-fowl skimming over the silver lake, the wind swaying the tall brackens on the Monk's Crag near by. Perhaps if Hester had gone on summing up the items of this pleasant picture, she would have included this stranger friend, for already he seemed in some

sort a friend; he was so kind and quiet, and her thoughts, springing to meet his, met with such a ready response. She almost felt as if she had known him long.

She tore off part of the paper, and was going to dip it in the water which rippled to their feet, but he took it out of her hands and did it himself; and then he wrapped it round the fern, very carefully, so as not to spoil one fresh green frond. He did it so well, that Hester could not help saying,

“I think you must have done that very often before.”

“Well; yes, I have. And perhaps I shall often do it again. And now good-bye,” he said, as Hester turned to go away, “we shall be friends, I think, if we ever meet again.”

Hester thought so too.

And then she went down the winding path, he watching the slight fairy figure, until a turn in the glade hid it from his sight.

If Hester had searched deeply into that dim vague sadness with which she passed the little gate, and came out into the high road, she would have found at its root the thought that perhaps she never should see this stranger again, that the little gleam of sunlight which, coming so suddenly, had opened to her almost a new world of happiness, would close up, and never brighten more.

After she had gone he gathered up his materials, and went on with the sketch he had just been finishing when he saw Hester climb the rock. He wanted a figure for the

foreground. It was hers, which, with a few light rapid strokes, sprang forth beneath his hand. Hers, with its light swaying grace and girlish yet womanly richness of outline.

"She is a pretty little creature, and so intelligent too," he said to himself, as he put in the last touch. "It was pleasant to meet in this way. I will know more of her."

CHAPTER VII.

THE time must have passed quickly whilst Hester and the strange gentleman were chatting under that beech tree. For though, when he opened his portfolio, the sun was just low enough to cast long slanting shadows across the glades of hyacinth and primrose, yet before they parted, the shadows were quite gone, and there lay over all the landscape the soft, even tint of coming twilight—twilight that would so quickly deepen into gloom.

Hester knew very well if she went home by the path through the meadows, night

would have set in before she could reach Milcote, and so she took the high road, which, though not so pretty, was more direct, and safer, because more frequented. It led her into Angusbury, and through the Abbey Close into Lellandsbank, and then into the lane which passed Mr. Tredegar's house.

Walking very quickly, she might reach home before dark; and to be out in the dark alone was a thing which, of all others, Hester dreaded. Somehow her imagination conjured up strange things then; she used to fancy she heard footsteps behind her; she used to remember all the disagreeable stories she had heard when she was a child, of lonely roads, and robbers, and spectres. She would do almost anything rather than walk down Milcote Lane alone at night.

Angusbury was a quiet place, and this did not happen to be market-day, so she only passed a stray traveller now and then, or a group of little children coming home from their work of hoeing turnips on some of the neighbouring farms. Yet night was gathering fast when she reached the town, and though she felt tired and rather faint—surely that pleasant conversation had made her forget all about the biscuits in her satchel—she hurried on. It was half an hour's walk, if not more, from Angusbury to Milcote; half an hour's walk, even if she could hurry all the way, much more if she slackened her pace, as she would be obliged to slacken it before long through weariness. At last she got into the narrow road, from which, far off, she could see the tall elm-tree whose boughs shadowed

her own room window. She should still be home before the stars were out.

As she came to a turn in the road—that same turn where she fancied she had seen the gipsies as she came from Lellands-bank a year ago—a woman met her, poorly dressed, and carrying a large bundle. She could scarcely see her face, for that was a gloomy part of the road, and the woman held her head down. Only Hester saw that she was very pale, and walked slowly, as if footsore and weary. The woman stopped her.

“Can you tell me, Miss, if I am in the right road for St. Angusbury?”

It was seldom a woman of that mean, poverty-stricken appearance gave the place so much of its proper name. Almost all the common people called it Anby. Hester,

however, was too much in a hurry to criticise very closely her mode of speaking. All she thought about now was getting home before dark.

“Yes, you are quite right. You must go straight on a little farther, then take the first turn to the right, and that will bring you into the town.”

“Thank you, Miss. And could you tell me if the station is very far away when I get there?”

“No, not very far; any one will tell you the way to it.”

And then Hester would have hurried on, but something in the woman's weary, dejected aspect touched her, and she said gently,

“You look tired. Have you come far?”

“Yes, Miss. I've walked from Alton, and that's good fifteen miles; a heavy

way, Miss, for a hungry woman to walk; and I'm going to Millsmany by the train to-night, if only I can get there in time. But I'm very tired."

And a sigh, more than a sigh, a groan, came from the woman's pale lips.

Hester remembered that there was a cheap train to Millsmany at eight o'clock, the last that night. By taking the most direct road, the woman might be in time to catch it. But how was she to find that most direct road? The night was falling fast. Hester dare not turn and go back with her. She gave her the best directions she could, but even they were rather confusing, for Angusbury was a strange twisting place, full of crooks and turns, and to reach the station the woman must thread her way through many of them. However,

it could not be helped. Hester told her as well as she was able, the woman thanked her, and they parted.

But Hester felt ill at ease. The woe-worn aspect of the woman still seemed to follow her, the heavy sigh with which she had faltered out—"I'm very tired." The night was dark, and she was foolishly afraid of being alone in the dark; but it would be harder still for that poor woman to be left behind, alone in a strange place, weary and hungry. Besides, that day had been a very bright one to Hester; could she not put one little gleam of brightness into this sad life for all that had been given her?

She hesitated no longer, but turned back. Just as she reached the woman again, one of her Sunday-school children came up,

and a bright thought flashed into Hester's mind.

"Here, Jessie, you know the nearest way to the station?"

"Yes, Miss," and the little girl dropped a curtsey.

"Then will you show this person the way, the *very* nearest way, you know, for she wants to catch the train to Millsmany, and if you don't go quickly, she will be too late. You are sure you know the nearest way?"

"Yes, Miss Hester; down Angusgate and across the Close, and through Spence's yard, and then down the back end of Cross Gate," answered the child, running over the names with a readiness which showed her well enough acquainted with the ins and outs of the place.

That was enough. Hester remembered the biscuits in her satchel; wrapping them hastily up in the piece of newspaper which was left, she gave them to the woman. They might for just a little time slacken the grip of hunger.

"Now, Jessie, go as quickly as ever you can."

"Yes, Miss, that I will; I'll bring her there in no time."

And the little thing, proudly important of the trust reposed in her, trotted away with a light, elastic step, strangely contrasting with the slow, weary tread of her companion.

"I thank you; you are very good," said the woman as she followed her little guide.

Hester noticed that as she said these

words she did not drop a curtsy, but inclined her head with a graceful motion which would have done no discredit to a born lady. Who could she be?—how came she there, so poorly clad, so hunger-bitten, too?”

But Hester had no time to watch them as they went down the narrow road. The night was dark, and she, too, was far from home, and there was no one stronger than herself to make her feel as she had felt only the night before, even through the gloom of that lonely road, quite safe.

Yes, there was, though. That heavy footstep, falling with such firm, measured tramp upon the silent path, belonged only to Nils Brayton. Hester could have told that footstep among a thousand. She was safe now—quite safe.

Mr. Brayton was coming home from work, and he had turned aside to post some letters. He had just passed the woman, so closely indeed that the fringes of her thin, worn shawl got entangled in his walking stick; but he had stooped down to set it free without even a single glance at her face, for just then he had caught sight of Helen disappearing behind the bend of the road, and for once in his life he felt thankful to the colonel, whose unpunctuality had kept him two hours later than usual that evening.

With just the words, "It is late for you to be out alone, I will see you safely home," he joined her, and they walked on together to Milcote; whilst the woman and Jessie took their way to the station, whither we will follow them by and by.

That was a pleasant evening for at least three people in Angusbury.

For Hester, as she sat up in her own little room, arranging those fern leaves to which belonged already so precious a store of memories; going over again in thought each word and tone of that pleasant conversation, recalling the stranger's look, his smile, and frank, winning ways, the graceful courtliness which made her feel that she, too, shy and reserved though she was, unpractised in social arts and elegancies, could give satisfaction and even pleasure. For something in the stranger's manner told her that she pleased him, and something in her own heart told her joyfully enough that he had far more than pleased her.

For Nils Brayton, too, as he wrote steadily

on past stroke after stroke of the clock, only pausing from time to time to brighten his slow toil by thought of the gentle voice which had bidden him good night at Milcote gate. That voice and its memory was the music now which cheered many a march of self-denying duty.

And for some one else, too, whose ideas of self-denial and duty were by no means so rigorous as Nils Brayton's. For the stranger of Monk's Crag, who, as he put on his leopard-skin slippers, and stretched himself on a sofa in one of the most luxurious rooms of one of the most luxurious hotels of Angusbury, let his thoughts drift away to the bright, pretty young girl, who had so strangely come across his path that day. He loved all pleasant and beautiful things, and for many a long month he had

seen nothing more pleasant and beautiful than that girl's face.

And what of the poor lonely woman, for whom no one cared, whose memory was held either for love or fancy in no heart of man?

CHAPTER VIII.

PERHAPS it was well for Hester's peace of mind that the thickly-gathering gloom of night hid the tired, hunger-nipped face which daylight would have revealed. That sense of peace and safety which always shrined her round in Nils Brayton's presence, would not have been so unbroken; she would not have dreamed so quietly at night of the green knoll, and the silvery lake, and the golden sunlight over beds of primroses and violets, and the pleasant voice of the stranger at her side, could she have seen those hollow cheeks

and great shadowy black eyes, from which even Jessie started, half frightened, when the light of the station lamps flared down upon them.

Strange contrast between those two! The little child so rosy and happy, pleased to do a kind action for anyone, more pleased still to do it for "dear Miss Hester;" and this woman, so sad and trouble-stained, so weary and heavy-laden. Ah! what unknown weight of grief—perhaps of wrong and sin—lay between this night and the long-past time when her years were as those of the child at her side?

"There it is—that's the station," said Jessie, when, faithful to her trust, she had brought the woman by the nearest way.

"I am much obliged to you, little girl."

But this time the voice was fainter. She breathed hard and fast. Hunger and haste together had been almost too much for her. She felt in her pocket for a few stray coppers which she knew would be spared from her fare, and offered them to the child. But Jessie folded her fat little palms together, not without a certain unconscious dignity.

“No, thank you, ma’am. I don’t want nothing from you; and I hope you’ll get safe to wherever you’re going.”

And then she ran away home to the little cottage, where mother was singing baby to sleep.

The woman went into the station. A train was just starting. The last box had been heaved into the van, the last ticket looked at, the final “all right” sounded,

the guard had blown his whistle and edged into his snug quarters at the end of the long line of carriages.

"Where for?" said a stray porter.

"Millsmany, third-class."

"Too late! Yon's it," and the man pointed with his thumb to the already-moving train.

The woman rushed forward with what little strength she had left.

"Oh! stop, please! I want to go."

The engine-driver looked back, so did the guard out of his little window. One shabby woman with a bundle in her hand, third-class—no, scarcely worth stopping the train for her, and on it went.

She watched it with dumb, almost sullen disappointment, as it slowly glided away, until its red lights were lost in the

gloom. Lost in the gloom; and so was she.

A porter, who was wheeling away some luggage, saw her standing there, and came up to her.

“Left behind, mum, I suppose? Sorry for you, 'cause it's the last cheap train to-night. The express'll start in twenty minutes—first and second only; but you don't look like going express. There's a cheap train at half-past five in the morning, as I reckon 'ud be best for you to go by; and I daresay my missis wouldn't object taking you in cheap for a night. I've known her do it afore for folks as was left.”

The woman glanced at him out of those hunger-sharpened eyes, but made no reply, and he went away. It was no new thing for people, especially women, to be left be-

hind with their bundles, and boxes, and baggage.

“They’re shiftless things, is women,” he said good-naturedly, as he lifted the barrow and set off to the other end of the platform. “Can’t think what there’s so many on ’em for.”

And all this time Hester was walking home with Nils Brayton, along the dim, quiet Milcote road, under the stars which began to twinkle out through the gathering night. But Hester did not care for the night. She was safe now. She hoped that the woman was safe too. She would ask Jessie next Sunday.

It was Hester’s stopping to question and debate with herself, before she turned back, that had produced the mischief. Had she obeyed her first impulse, and gone with

the woman to the station, and taken the ticket for her as she once thought of doing, the poor creature would have got off. A minute or two, not more than that, would have saved the train. And what then?

What then? It seemed a little thing that a "tramping woman" should be left behind for a few hours, yet little causes cast their shadows far for good or ill over many a wide future. Hester's destiny might have been strangely different had she obeyed that momentary impulse.

Might have been,—might have been. Little sentence, in whose infinite depths lie buried the hopes and joys of many a human life. Oh! how sadly sometimes we ponder those words. How bitterly we think of brightness gone, of sunshine quenched out of the heart for ever, which one little

word of ours, one little act done or left undone, might have held there still. Too slowly we learn the great truth, that, for those whom God takes into his own care, all events do come of set purpose and forethought. These things are to be so, not for us to question why. On the deep based rock of His unchangeable purpose our feeble wills break so helplessly, so uselessly; their mightiest force and passion but as idle spray which falls back into the ocean and is lost. Enough that Hester did not go; enough that that little impulse died ere it became an action.

The woman stood on the platform for a short time, watching the train until it was out of sight. Then she went into the second-class waiting-room.

It was full of respectable people, who did

not seem disposed to make way for a third-class passenger, a shabbily-dressed woman with a bundle. She was too proud to ask for that which they were too ill-bred to offer—room to warm herself at the bright fire, so she went out again to the platform, and sat on one of the benches just under a great board, upon which were set forth in scarlet letters the merits of some one's "Sommier elastique portatif."

She had leisure now to think of her hunger, and the biscuits which that kind, unknown Samaritan had given her to stay it. They were soon eaten, she had had nothing since morning, and then she took a draught of water from the drinking fountain close by. It seemed to refresh her, for she began to smooth her hair and rearrange her disordered dress, and, dipping

her handkerchief in the fountain basin, she laved her hot forehead and cheeks. Truly, as she had said, it was a weary way from Alton, the poor, white face told that plainly enough.

Another train at half-past five in the morning, and now it was just eight. Well, a night's lodging would cost no more in Angusbury than in Millsmany, perhaps not so much. Wherever she went, she must pay her own way and win her own bread. To-morrow morning, then, she would wend her way to the great town, and ask of it a garret to hunger in, and work to keep the life from quite dying out, as she almost prayed it might die out sometimes.

After awhile she began to walk up and down the platform, idly twisting in her fingers the piece of newspaper in which

Hester had wrapped up the biscuits for her. It was a half page of the *Standard*, a paper which, ever since he came to England, Mr. Tredegar had taken in regularly. As she read it a spasm passed over her face. She staggered, and had to lean against one of the pillars for support. But it was only for a little while. By a resolute effort she steadied herself, and then, with proud and haughty bearing, strangely different from that with which she had left it half an hour ago, she returned to the waiting-room.

It was empty now, a bright fire blazing in the grate, three crystal-shaded jets of gas burning away for the sole benefit of leather-backed benches and painted walls, and a painfully ugly oil-cloth of an Egyptian pattern, yellow splashes on a brown ground. But had that dingy oil-cloth been the richest

of velvet pile, and those leather-backed benches the most luxurious of tabouret lounges, the woman would have given little heed to them. She spread the paper out upon the table, laid her thin, bony finger on a short sentence, not more than three lines, in one corner, and read it again and again, and yet again.

“Ha! ha!” she whispered to herself, between her closed teeth, “the train did well to go without me. It did very well.”

Sad as it was an hour ago, one would rather have seen her face with the weary pain it wore when Hester first saw it on Milcote Road, than with the almost fiendish smile of exultant triumph which alternately flushed and paled it now. Not passion, not anger, but cool, determinate malice—that

was what spoke through the dark eyes, as they rained their fiery glances on the unconscious bit of paper.

She was not long in deciding what to do. Carefully folding her newspaper, and gathering up her bundle, she went out again and sought the porter who had offered her a night's lodging. He was leaning over an open window, gossiping with the man who kept the "luggage room."

"You told me just now that perhaps your wife could take me in for the night. I don't think that I shall go by this early train. Could I lodge with you for a day or two?"

The porter seemed somewhat awed by the air of careless superiority which the woman had so unexpectedly assumed, and which, spite of her lowly garb and that

plebeian bundle, sat naturally enough upon her. He touched his cap as politely as though she had been a "first class," that flimsy worn shawl an ermine wrap, that shapeless bundle the costliest of morocco travelling cases.

"Well, mum, we haven't been used to take in nobody, but my missis is as well-disposed a woman, though I say it myself, as any you'll find in all Anby, and I don't misdoubt but what she'd make you comfortable in a small way. I reckon you wouldn't want a vast o' waitin' of."

"No, not much."

"'Cause you see, wi' the children, there's six on 'em, she hasn't a deal o' time. And now I come to think on, I mind her sayin' a bit past as she wouldn't mind puttin' herself about to addle summut extry

now that times is bad, and butcher meat past getting for dearness. Ninepence a pound, mum, butcher meat here in Anby, and bread not to call much cheaper, to say nowt o' shoes for the childer, and a bag o' coal once a week. Pay here isn't much, and a man wi' a big family is hard putten to, to make ends meet comfortable."

The woman listened with ill-concealed impatience to her somewhat wordy companion, and as soon as he paused in the detail of his domestic experiences, she brought him back to the subject in hand.

"Yes, yes. I daresay it is hard work. People in England generally do find it hard work to get a living. If you will tell me your name and where you live, I will go to your wife at once;" and then, seeing that he looked somewhat suspiciously

at her seedy wardrobe, she added, "I have money enough to pay you for as long as I am likely to stay. You need not be afraid of losing anything by me."

"All right, mum, don't mention it. My name's Martin Smith, and I live number four Spence's Yard, back Angusgate. You must go down High Street, mum, and take the first turning but one to your right, and that'll bring you into back Angusgate, and Spence's Yard is right afore you, writ up on a board over a passage. Anybody about ull tell you where Martin Smith, railway porter, lives. It's nobbut a little place, mum, but it's clean and decent, for there isn't a tidier body in Anby, though I say it myself, than my wife; and if you tell her that it was me sent you, I'll warrant she'll make you comfortable enough. There's

a little room upstairs to the front, as t' eldest girl goes out to nuss, sleeps in of a night, and with packin' t' other childer a bit closer, she'll mak' room for you, and you can settle money betwixt yourselves."

"Thank you."

She turned away, and he watched her out of the station. No weariness now, no listless languor in her step; rather the determinate energy of one who knows her work and will do it, through all hindrance and all danger.

"Mebby the missis'll think I've been ower rash," said he, as he rubbed his head and pulled his glazed cap more firmly down over his rough brown hair; "but she looks sort o' decent, and it'll be a little towards keepin' the children dry shod, bless 'em. Folks is like to live."

And with this most undeniable proposition, he went back to his work.

An hour later the woman was sitting on a patchwork quilted bed in a clean little room, whose one small window looked out over a square court-yard, where twenty or thirty boys and girls were shouting lustily as they played at hop-Scotch on the flagged pavement. And now and then there would be a roar of laughter as a big lad overbalanced himself and measured his length upon the chalk marks, or a shriek of terror as some virago of a matron ran into their midst, and seizing on her luckless petticoated urchin, gave him a ringing box on the ear and dragged him home to bed.

But the woman heeded them not. She was still pondering over her scrap of paper, and as she read it the cold, malicious

smile grew deeper on her face. We will leave her there. She has her work to do, and she will do it. There is no tenderness now in those black eyes of hers, woman's pity seems burnt out of them; cost what it may, ruin whom it will, that work of hers shall be done.

CHAPTER IX.

AND so time passed on, bearing with it St. Angusbury's little tide of joys and hopes and fears, until the lengthening days, and the warm sunlight, and the sweet breath of hawthorn stealing down every lane and dingle, proclaimed that May had come.

Nils Brayton saw but little of Hester after that evening when he overtook her so unexpectedly on the lonely Milcote road. Much as he would have enjoyed a quiet hour sometimes in that room where she and her father spent so many silent evenings, he knew Mr. Tredegar's habits well

enough to be sure that the presence of a visitor would be little else than an annoyance. And he had not enough confidence in his own powers of pleasing to be sure that her face would brighten to meet him, or that any kindness of his could help to pass her time more pleasantly along.

There was little about Nils Brayton to make him the fascinating companion of an hour or an evening. He could not string together sweet compliments for ladies, he could not gossip to an indefinite extent about current town affairs, reported engagements, flirtations, marriages, and the like, for his stock of information on these subjects was painfully limited. And, indeed, on other topics of more general interest, such as new books, magazines, literature and

poetry, he was scarcely more at home. To speak the plain truth, Nils Brayton was not a very pleasant companion for anyone who did not thoroughly know him. He certainly did lack much which a man who would shine in society ought to possess. With very hard toil and travail he had hewn a character naturally rugged into something like shape and symmetry, but no labour of his, try as he might, could ever carve out of that stubborn granite rock such delicate broidery work of leaf and foliage as the sculptor can so easily bid to spring forth from the more yielding limestone. He was very plain, almost severe in his simplicity; but, as the stonemasons say of their rough work, such as he was he would last. Time would wear nothing away from that granite surface of his but its roughness. The rude

winds of strife and toil, the damps of care and trouble, which, gnawing at the fair carved work of some men's characters, so soon spoils all its beauty, would leave him quite untouched.

Even now, as the slow years passed over him, he felt that they were but taking from him what he could well afford to lose; that they did but smooth the angles of his nature, making him more gentle, more charitable, readier to think well of others, easier to be entreated, willing to forgive, as indeed they should ever be who also need forgiveness. But he was not sure that Hester felt this too: He doubted yet if she knew him for what he really was, a man earnestly striving to live a noble, pure, and upright life. And so, though day by day the thought of her was sinking deeper into his heart, he spoke no word.

He waited until time, which generally gives to all sooner or later their due, should give him his,—the right to win and wear this one crowning jewel of his life.

She should be so safe with him. He would be so true, so faithful. The old wasted years which had dealt so harshly with him, wherein he had battled so painfully, often conquered, yet rising again to conquer at last, should be forgotten, or remembered only as in quiet summer-evenings we look back upon the heat and glare of noonday. Life even for him should be full of beauty, full of peace, and he knew he could make it so for her. So he waited.

Waited on through weeks and weeks, whilst Hester still lived her own quiet little life, not knowing who took so much thought for her. That life was slowly brightening, but

through no word of his. What brightened it so, she never asked. It might be just the early summer sunshine, which came to her as it came to the half opened flowers, and kissed them into full rounded beauty. It might be the thought of her sister's coming home, so near now, when she should have someone to care for, and watch over, and spend her love upon. It might be the patient doing of such little duty as God gave her to do, the lowly reverent obedience, never failing to bring peace at last, which was changing Hester's face, and fixing a constant smile there in place of the half sad, half listless weariness it once wore.

Or when the smile was brightest, was she thinking of that afternoon at the Monk's Crag, that clear, cloudless April afternoon, when the sun made such golden stains upon

the glass, such long trails of shine and shadow upon the blue hyacinth beds; when the birds sang so merrily, and the wind, sporting down through the narrow glades of the wood, tossed the tiny leaflets of that little fern—she had it safely pressed now—which grew “betwixt and the blue sky,” on that crag amongst the mountain ash trees?”

But if Hester was happy, she knew not why,—happy with that fresh unconscious happiness which asks no questions, and wisely looks not beyond the present, Sally, whistling blithely as heretofore over the daily dusting and sweeping, would have been at no loss to account for her ample, rubicund complacency. Things were going on with Sally “altogether beautiful,” as she expressed it. No vexing haze of uncertainty about *her* prospects. On the contrary, they stood out in sunny outline, brave

and clear ; clear as a three-roomed cottage, at half-a-crown a week, already taken, and a steady, honest young fellow, of five and twenty, with good prospects and a blameless character, and a thriving business in the milk line, could make them.

Sally had given warning three weeks ago. Next Sunday she was to be "asked in church" for the first time, though without the remotest possibility that any just cause or impediment would interpose to prevent her from taking "Thomas, bless him," for better for worse, and keeping his house, and doing her best to make him comfortable, and attending to the milk pans, and perhaps going round with them herself now and then when Tom was away at an odd day's farming work in the country. There was only one thing that cast the faintest

approach to a cloud on Sally's young budding happiness, and that was Miss Hester's difficulty in meeting with a suitable successor in the sweeping and dusting department. That certainly did trouble her a little sometimes. For Miss Hester had been so kind, and helped them along so nicely in their courtship, and made things so smooth and pleasant for them, and taken such a friendly interest in the half-crown cottage, and gone all the way to Lellands-bridge one fine May morning to see the spotted brown cow which "Thomas, bless him," had bought to begin business with. And she had advised Sally how to lay out her wages to the best account with a view to housekeeping, and told her how much she ought to give a yard for huckaback towelling, and how much for un-

bleached sheets and tablecloths, and had promised her the wedding-dress, which was to be brown print—good colour for washing—with a white star upon it, just like the star upon the new cow's forehead, and a frilled cape to match. No, Sally couldn't think without a pang of Miss Hester's being "put about," as she would be put about if a decent servant did not hand up in the course of a week or two. And if the clergyman had not taken the banns, and the cottage rent had not been going, and "Thomas, bless him," hadn't been so dreadfully impatient, she didn't know but she should have given him back word and let him wait a week or two longer. But something would hand out. Yes, something would be sure to hand out, it always did.

So Sally used to say as she sat in the trim, tidy Milcote kitchen, stitching away at the above mentioned huckaback towelling, and measuring off length after length of chess-board patterned cloth for that little square deal table at which she and Thomas Bilson were to sit face to face for ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or perhaps fifty years. And Margaret would reply, not without a certain wholesome asperity, for she did not like to hear Sally talk as if there wasn't another servant in all Angusbury to match herself :

“Thee needn't trouble, honey. There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. I don't misdoubt but what Milcote'll go on same as ever for comfortable-ness when you and young Bilson have eaten the gilt off the gingerbread, and

begun to think it isn't so sweet as it used to be."

For Margaret had never married, and never meant to do so.

CHAPTER X.

THAT was a proud day for Mr. Bilson when the gentleman introduced by newspaper to the Angusbury public as "Basil Brooke, Esq., late of Kensington," formally took his place as director of the young ladies' class at the School of Art. So long as a month ago—indeed, as soon as he had received official announcement of the precise day of inauguration—Mr. Bilson had given his wife orders to reserve his last new collar, and to get up his best of possible fronts without respect to expense in the matter of soap and starch. And when,

after having arrayed himself in his Sunday suit, and fastened his spotted silk cravat with an artistic sixpenny pin in the shape of a clenched fist, and turned himself round several times before the small looking-glass that hung at the back of the kitchen door, Mr. Bilson sallied forth to the post of duty, it was his own private opinion that never since the palmy days of the fancy chalk business, when he won the united heart of Angusbury feminine by his pretty compliments, had he presented such a resplendent appearance to the gaze of an admiring public.

The class did not assemble until two, but at least half an hour before that time he was in his place, shifting easels, adjusting chairs, arranging drawing-boards and copies for the younger pupils, or "chalk

squares and elementaries," as he used to call them, alluding to their respective lines of study, who occupied a long desk down the centre of the room. Mr. Bilson never spoke of junior, advanced, or middle-class pupils. To his precise and classified mind the school arranged itself into "chalk squares and elementaries," "outlines and perpendiculars," "antiques" and "naturals."

Mr. Brooke came about a quarter of an hour before class time. Bilson received him with a low bow, which had that very morning been practised for at least twenty minutes before the looking-glass at the back of the kitchen door. Mr. Brooke returned it with an easy, appropriating sort of grace, and then planted himself once and for ever in Bilson's good opinion by remarking, as he glanced down the room,

"You have the management here, I suppose. You keep the place in beautiful order."

And certainly the room did look its best, with the May sunlight streaming in through crimson draperies upon groups of antique sculpture, friezes, capitals, and medallions, which were ranged from end to end on a background of sombre neutral tint. And to do him justice, Bilson took a pride in his work. It was to him what her scrupulously sanded floor and shining kitchen utensils are to the country housewife. And so, as he looked round on his spotless Apollos, and lustrous Venuses, and shining Junos, Pans, and Niobes, who every morning received the carefullest of feather-brush treatment, Mr. Bilson's face brightened with the honest pride of a man who knows he

deserves the praise that is given him. And as he touched his front lock of grey hair, in delighted acknowledgment of the master's compliment, he said to himself:

"Sensible man, this. Shouldn't wonder if he don't mean to be equal for sensibleness to the one that's gone."

But Mr. Brooke would have said just the same if the casts and copies had been thrown about in one chaos of artistic disorder, and if those gloved fingers of his could have written each Grecian divinity's name in the successive strata of dust which careless hands had suffered to accumulate upon its forehead. Part of Mr. Brooke's philosophy was to make people pleased with themselves. It followed then, as a matter of course, that they were pleased with him.

He was a fine, rather noble-looking man, this Basil Brooke, with slightly grey hair, which, however, did not give him the appearance of age, for the face which it shadowed had not a single deep or painful line about it. Judging him from his face, he certainly could not be more than five and thirty, most likely not so much as that. What would impress anyone in looking at him was the fine mobility of his features. Even now, in talking to this common man, his face was continually changing its expression. The lips, full and rich as those of a child, never kept the same curve for a moment together. Even the smile that came and went upon them had a thousand different meanings, of which, perhaps, a delicate, graceful satire was the one that lingered longest there. There was not much power

in the face, but great sweetness, great fascination. This was a man who would rule, not so much by resolute firmness of will, as by perfect tact in adapting himself to individual character. You could tell by looking at him that he had a woman's perception and a man's reason, and these two qualities would give him almost unbounded influence over other people, while yet he seemed to exert none at all.

And his way of standing there was so easy, so unstudied—leaning upon the open door, swaying to and fro with its motion, steadying himself now and then with a little ebony cane, whose flexile stem seemed as if it could take as many shapes as its master, and looking amusedly down from a pair of deep blue eyes upon the dapper Mr. Bilson, who, all nods and jerks

and smiles, was fidgeting about amongst the drawings.

Mr. Bilson was impressed. He thought he had never seen such a gentlemanly person in his life—never. And to have such an eye, too, for cleanliness and order! It was not one artist in a thousand that had an eye for cleanliness and order.

“Yes, sir,” he said, waving his arm in the direction of the statues. “I takes a pride in these here. You see, sir, having been so long connected with the concern, and having a hand in the keeping of it up in a manner, I know more about art than a good many people does what hasn’t been brought up amongst it, and these things is a means of enjoyment, as you may say, just same as if I had moulded ’em out myself. The master that’s gone,

and he was a sensible man, sir, was the master that's gone, though I don't doubt but you'll beat him far enough, if you'll excuse me mentioning it, sir."

"Certainly."

And another fresh smile rippled up over the dark, handsome face.

"Yes, sir. Well, the master that's gone used to say to me, 'Mr. Bilson,' he used to say, 'I never met with a man before that had your taste in art,' and he was right, sir, he was. Why, sir, that Apollo, it's glorious, a-standing there with its arm stretched out ; the books says it's glorious, and everybody does, and so do I. And them there Cupids and laughing fauns is majestic, and so is them friezes ; there's nothing in nature, though it's very pretty in its way, to come up to them there friezes. But, sir, I'll take you round a bit afore the young

ladies comes, and give you an 'int or two about managing of 'em. They're things that takes a deal of managing, is young ladies; but you see, having been so many years in the school, I knows all about the proprieties of it."

"Certainly. I'll go wherever you like to take me, and you must tell me how the class has been conducted. I have no doubt it has been quite as much indebted to you as to the late master. But shall we have time before the young ladies come?"

Mr. Bilson put his hand to his waistcoat pocket. "Oh! dear, I declare, I've gone and forgot my watch again," and then he jumped on the bench under the great window, from which the abbey clock could be seen. Mr. Bilson had always "unfortunately forgotten his watch," when anyone asked the

time, and some of the more ill-natured pupils had been heard to insinuate that the article in question was a myth altogether, having no existence except in Mr. Bilson's imagination.

"Ten minutes to two, sir. And they're dreadful unpunctual, is most of the young ladies. We're looking to you, sir, is me and the committee, to stir 'em up to what's proper. Now them there, sir," and Mr. Bilson pointed to one side of the long centre table, "is young girls from ten years old and up'ards, chalk squares and elementaries; and the outlines and perpendiculars sits opposite. Outlines and perpendiculars only pays half-price, and so you won't need to give no special attention to 'em. And the antiques stands at them there easels, down at the bottom end of the room, promiscus with the Apollos and Junos.

Most of the young ladies is antiques at present, sir."

Mr. Brooke's eyes ran over with merriment, but his face and voice were quite grave as he replied—

"Indeed, I am very sorry for that. But I had found out, before I came to the school, that most of the Angusbury young ladies are *antiques*."

"Have you, sir?" said Mr. Bilson, innocently. "Maybe the committee has been showing you through the books; we always puts down in the books, whether the young ladies is antiques, or what they are. We've got over-many of 'em at the present. Antiques is all good in their way, but to my taste nat'ral objects is better."

"And to mine too," said Mr. Brooke gravely. "There is nothing like youth and beauty."

“And now, sir,” continued Bilson, leading the way to the other end. “The young ladies as paints flowers and natur’ sits here. We haven’t many as copies natur’ now, though, sir.”

“I suppose not. Most people prefer artifice.”

Mr. Bilson did not quite understand that last word. However, as he was a man who never displayed his ignorance, he made no remark, but passed on to the easel before which the county member’s daughter sat, when she honoured the class with her presence.

“Now, sir, this here’s Miss Jellat’s piece,” and lifting the tissue paper screen from a drawing-board, he brought to view a huge collection of scarcely recognisable plums and peaches of most vivid hue. “This

is Miss Jellat's piece, and a reg'lar fright it is, and I don't doubt, if you're a sensible person, in art, you'll say the same. But law! sir," and Mr. Bilson lowered his voice, "you mustn't let on ought o' that sort to the young lady. Her father's the county member, and he lets her come to give a distinction to the concern. If anything happened as the county member got offended, I wouldn't give six-pence for either your situation or mine. You might as well shut up this here school altogether, as tell Miss Jellat her piece wasn't perfection. And so, sir, you know what to do for *her*."

"Thank you. I shall not forget."

"No, sir; I'm sure you won't. It's everything in a place like this, is knowing what to say to the young ladies. But now, sir, this here piece is different. I should say, sir,

as this here piece goes past natur' itself, for being a perfect work of art." And Bilson led the new master to the only other easel at that end of the room.

It was Hester's. Her drawing was arranged upon it, and, on a little table close by, the leaves and flowers she was copying. Bilson bent over it with genuine loving admiration, and brushed away an audacious fly that was leisurely taking an airing on one of the scrolls.

"Now, sir, our master that's gone used to say that this here picture would be a *shade oover*, and I don't doubt, if he meant something pretty, but what he was right. It's a piece that does credit to the school, is this here. Me, and the master that's gone, both says so. You may praise that, sir, as much as you've a mind to, and you'll none say a word over-much."

A light smile passed across Mr. Brooke's face, as he scanned the work over which Hester had spent so many patient hours. He knew those graceful leaves again, whose tiny fronds she had copied with such artistic skill that you might almost fancy a breath would cause them to quiver and tremble; those leaves, which scarce a month ago he had gathered from that tall crag, three miles away, and laid in her hand. No need to tell him whose patient fingers had wrought there.

Bilson saw the smile, and thought it indicated admiration for the grouping of the piece.

"Yes, sir. I knew you'd admire that. Them there ferns and ivy-leaves is the perfection of nat'ral beauty. It was me, sir, as telled her she ought to have 'em there. The master that's gone, and he was a sensible

man was the master that's gone, though I don't doubt you'll beat him for sensibleness, used to say as he didn't know a man to go past me for knowing what was proper in art."

"It's Miss Tredegar's piece, sir," continued he, seeing that Mr. Brooke was looking about for a name somewhere. "She lives with her father at Milcote, a matter of a mile and a half away from here, but she's the reg'larest of any of the pupils that comes, always to the minute, and works right on to the very last. She's particular wishful to get this done afore the prize giving, and that comes on about the back end of July, or thereabouts, according to convenience. You'll have heard of the prize giving, sir; the Bishop of St. Olaves is coming down to give 'em, and there'll be a deal of speechifying, and votes

of thanks, and that sort of thing. You'll be expected to come forward yourself, sir, with something pretty about the ladies; but I'm thinking, sir, by the look of you, that sort o' thing won't be much of a trouble to you."

"Not in the slightest," returned the new master, with a smile quite different from that with which he had been scanning Hester's work.

And then he bent over it again. That picture, and the memories it brought, must both have been very pleasant to him.

"These ferns are rare," he said at last. "Were they copied from nature? Are they to be found in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, sir. I pointed 'em out to Miss Tredegar myself. I know where most pretty things is to be found hereabouts. She fetched 'em from the Monk's Crag; maybe

you don't know the place, being a stranger, but it's about three mile away. I don't know that they're to call very much out of the common way particular, if only folks knew where to look for 'em; but she seemed to set no end of store by them, did Miss Tredegar."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, she did. You know, sir, she oft brings bits o' leaves and flowers since she's been agate over this piece, and when she's finished copying of them, I mostly sweeps 'em away, or, maybe, takes 'em home to Mrs. Bilson—she's fond of seeing a bit o' green about the house, is Mrs. Bilson. And I was going to do same with them there ferns, but Miss Tredegar, she jumped up as quick, she did, and, 'Oh Mr. Bilson,' she said, 'please not to disturb those leaves;

I want to take them home with me.' 'All right, Miss,' says I; for, you see, sir, I never interferes with the young ladies, but I telled her I didn't know they was out of the common way rare, or I wouldn't have offered to meddle with 'em; and, 'Oh, no, Mr. Bilson,' she says, 'I don't think they are very rare,' and she sort of coloured up, while I thought I'd never seen her look so pretty—'I don't think they are very rare, but I want to keep them;' and my word, sir, if you'd seen how careful she wrapped them up, so as they shouldn't spoil! But maybe she's collectin' of 'em—it's a great fashion with the young ladies about here, is collectin' ferns."

Mr. Brooke had his own opinion about that, but he said nothing. Only, as he still continued to scan Hester's drawing, he

thought Mr. Bilson was a most amusing and pleasant companion ; quite a character, in his way.

Yes, quite a character—so very amusing !

CHAPTER XI.

“**B**UT I must be going now,” said the little man, who had jumped on the bench half a dozen times during the previous conversation to ascertain the time. “Yon’s the abbey clock just on the stroke of two, and some of the chalk squares and elementaries has come. They’ll be wanting me to set ’em a-going, and so will the perpendic’lars. The master that’s gone used mostly to leave the chalk squares to me. He said, having been so long in the concern, I could do for ’em almost as well as himself.”

And Mr. Bilson bustled away in the direction of the long desk, followed by the new master.

Whilst they had been talking together, the room had filled. About a dozen young girls had come in and taken their places in the centre department. Some of the "antiques," too, were standing before their easels at the lower end of the room. Antiques they were, truly, though attired in the most advanced style of Angusbury morning costume; for they had the hacked, faded look which women get after being dragged through the balls and assemblies of ten or twelve successive seasons; added to this, too, the disappointment of having spent so many years on the social treadmill without any tangible result in the shape of an "establishment."

Mr. Brooke sauntered down to act the preceptor amongst them, and it was whilst he was going from easel to easel, giving here and there a helping touch, now rounding the arm of a Venus, now putting a dimple into the chin of a crayon Cupid, or straightening the nose of a misrepresented Juno, that Hester Tredegear came in and took her place amongst the scrolls and capitals.

She had heard that the new master was to make his formal appearance this day, but she felt no special interest in the event. It was but little that the late master had done for his pupils in the way of instruction. Indeed, all who went to the School of Art were expected to depend upon themselves, and to help themselves. They had the best models supplied to them,

the best materials to work with, the best positions and lights to work by, and perhaps once during the class-time the master used to walk round and examine their performances; sometimes taking the pencil himself for a minute or two, sometimes just giving a hint and passing on; sometimes—and that was generally the case when he came to Hester's easel—uttering a brief “very good,” and nothing more. Most likely the new master would pursue the same course, only asserting more authority, to keep the pupils to their work.

There was no one else at that end of the room, Miss Jellat not having condescended to honour the class with her presence; and so, to avoid the interruption caused by two of the “chalk squares,” who were babbling in an undertone about the

respective merits of their performances, Hester removed her easel to a distance, and was soon so engrossed in her work as to forget everything else.

Although she did not know it, she made a pretty picture as she stood there in the track of the sunlight, which, coming through the mullioned windows, caught upon her light hair and seemed to turn it into threads of gold. And the crimson drapery which divided that recess from the rest of the school, formed a good background to her fair pale face and slight figure. Doubtless Mr. Brooke thought so too, for his eye often wandered thither as he went from desk to desk and easel to easel. That apparently careless glance of his missed nothing, though it appeared to notice so little. He observed the quiet absorption of her

manner, her complete, self-forgetting interest in her work; with what careless unconscious grace she would step back now and then to note the effect of some fresh arrangement in the leaves and flowers she was grouping with such artistic skill. Not a look, not a movement, escaped him. She worked for the true love of her art; it would be a pleasure to teach her—perhaps more than that.

By-and-bye he went up to Hester's end of the room. Unnoticed, he stood close by her, apparently watching the progress of her work, but, in reality, studying her; the changeful expression of her face, whose profile he could see as she turned from time to time to glance at the group of leaves which Bilson had placed in a glass of water on the table by her side.

Yes, this Hester Tredegar was certainly a pleasant study, far before the antiques, with their practised airs and graces, their pitiful attempts at juvenility, their painful efforts to hold fast departing youth. And far before the outlines and perpendiculars, too, who, having lost the pretty unconsciousness of childhood, without yet attaining the charm of girlhood, he was willing to leave to the guidance of Mr. Bilson. He was glad her easel was placed at that end of the room, away from the other pupils. It should stay there always.

“You are shading that leaf a little too strongly. Give me your pencil, if you please.”

And then Hester turned.

It was well she had moved into the quiet crimson curtained recess. It was well

that Miss Jellat, the county member's daughter, who ought to have been painting plums and peaches, was out riding after the hounds; otherwise, those keen black eyes would not have failed to notice the undisguised pleasure which sparkled in Hester's, and the rich flush, certainly not attributable to sunlight coming through crimson drapery now, which overspread her face as she encountered the recognising smile of the new master.

Although she was naturally very shy and quiet, yet she had not been trained in that school which teaches its pupils to hide all outward and visible sign of emotion under the mantle of "lady-like self-possession." And so, without staying to consider whether it was correct or not to do so, she spoke out the thought of her heart at once.

“Oh! I am so glad! I was wondering whether I should ever see you again.”

“Were you?” and with genuine pleasure Basil Brooke took the hand that was so frankly held out to him. “I knew the treat that was in store for me as soon as I came in this afternoon and saw this drawing of yours. I am glad too. We shall be friends now, shall we not?”

Hester's face was sufficient answer without any words. And, indeed, when the first thrill of glad surprise was past, it seemed quite natural that things should be as they were. A thought long brooded over, a hope long cherished, becomes at last so real, that, when fulfilled, there is no strangeness about it; it takes its place at once in actual life as it had done before in the beautiful life of thought.

Hester had felt so sure that, somehow, somewhere, they should meet again, though how or where she could not tell. And when, without another word, he took the pencil from her hand, and motioning her to stand aside, began to work at her drawing himself, they fell as naturally into their places of master and pupil, as though the relation were quite an old familiar one.

“You draw very well, Miss Tredegar. Have you been long in the school?”

“Only since we came to Angusbury.”

“Then you have not lived here always?”

“Oh! no. Papa has been in the service abroad. We came to Angusbury about five years ago, but I did not know of the school until after we had been settled here more than a year, and then I began to attend it. I am very fond of drawing.”

“So I see, or you could not have made such progress. I should like to look at some of your other drawings; do you take them home?”

“No, not at first. All that we do in the class are kept in the master's room until the end of the session—after the examination and prizes—and then they are returned to us.”

“Ah! Then some day I hope you will let me see those that have been returned to you. I shall know better how to direct your studies when you have shown me what you have done.”

That was all. Basil Brooke was too much of a gentleman to expose any of the pupils to remark by loitering needlessly at their easels.

After working on for a few minutes and

giving her some instructions about the arrangement of her subject, he put the pencil back into her hands and resumed his peregrinations amongst the outlines and perpendiculars. Only when class was over, and Hester was leaving the room, he said, with a bright, pleasant smile—

“Remember, you are to show me those drawings of yours soon.”

So then he would come to Milcote. And surely her papa would learn to care for him—he was so genial and friendly, and so clever too. Not like the Angusbury people, who could talk of nothing but shares, and the price of stock, and commonplace town gossip. And so that dream castle of hers was not to be a dream castle any longer, but real and true. The actual was not only to reach, but overpass the ideal.

That was a happy walk home for Hester. No need for summer sunshine to brighten it. She had enough and to spare in her own heart. Full as it was though, more would have been added had she known that, long after the School of Art was cleared, and Bilson, all triumphant self-complacency, had gone home to tell his wife about the sensibleness of the new master, Basil Brooke had lingered behind in the little room where the pupils' drawings were kept, looking out those which bore the name of Hester Tredgar, and pondering over them with a pleased, quiet smile.

What would it all come to?

CHAPTER XII.

ON her way home, Hester met Miss Lapiter scudding away down the High Street like a barque before the wind, the May breeze dancing through her neat little front of flaxen curls—Miss Lapiter never denied that it was a front—and playing the funniest pranks with a brown bow, which looked as if it had come from the clouds, and alighted by accident on the extremest tip of her straw bonnet, having apparently no connection with any other part thereof. Her face brightened up when she saw Hester, if indeed that face could be

said to brighten, which at all times wore an aspect of the cheeriest geniality. And Hester, too, was in the mood to give her a merry greeting.

“Good morning, Miss Lapiter. I knew you ever so far away by that distinguishing brown bow of yours. Was it an invention of your own to put it just there?”

“No, Miss Hester, I never think of such a thing as leaning to my own understanding in the way of millinery. And as you suggest, it certainly is a funny place for a bow, according to all my preconceived notions of where bows ought to be put. But it's as near as can be like what I see in the bonnet shops. You know, Miss Hester, having a limited income, I don't generally put my millinery out to do, but as I go down the streets I just give an eye round

to see what other people wear, and then I copy it as nearly as circumstances will permit. I'm not quite sure whether I've hit upon the correct latitude and longitude of this bow. I was rather in a hurry when I took the bearings of the pattern, and I came to the shop window again next day to see if it ought not to be shifted a trifle nearer to the equator—that's the ribbon across the middle of the bonnet, you know, my dear; but, unfortunately, the article had been nipped up by some one who had the same taste as myself, and though I've looked out for it every Sunday at church since, I have never been able to set eyes upon it. Unfortunate, now, isn't it?"

"It is," replied Hester, "especially if you are exercised in your mind about the latitude and longitude."

“Well, I am, my dear, and more so since I saw your papa taking particular notice of it last time I came to Milcote. But do you know, Miss Hester, it struck me, when I put this bow on, that it did look remarkably like a sparrow sitting alone upon a house-top. And—would you believe it?—the very first time I came downstairs in the bonnet, my tortoiseshell cat made a dead set at it, just like a pointer when it catches sight of a partridge, thereby convincing me of the folly of those people who say that cats go by scent, and not by sight; for, of course, my brown bow could smell of nothing but the dye, and I am not aware that that could suggest sparrows, except by very remote connection. But, dear me, Miss Hester, how I am running on, and never telling you that you are the

very identical person of all others that I wanted to meet. In fact, I said, when the subject at first suggested itself to my mind, that it was providential—nothing but providential; for where could she find herself settled in a better home, with Christian privileges, and the most proper of examples in the person of Margaret, who, I'm sure, is a living pattern of the beauty of religion, though objecting to the Established Church, which I can't help regretting. But that is as it is, and we can't make it different, can we?"

Hester had had experience of Miss Lapiter's manner of introducing any new subject. It generally came on enveloped in a cloud of mist, which, slowly clearing off, left a surface of clear, distinct common sense. And so, though at present in utter darkness as

to the possible termination of this harangue, she waited patiently, being convinced that good would come of it at last.

“Providential, my dear Miss Hester, nothing but providential, as, indeed, I always say everything is that comes to pass in this world, though sometimes Providence seems such a hopeless tangle that there’s no seeing to the end of it. Because if you get one born of respectable parents, ten to one but the poor thing has been afflicted with the rudiments of a polite education, which, as I take it, is a great affliction to that class of people, and knows more about the use of the globes than the management of a frying-pan; and if she comes from the lower stratum of society, why the bad breeding keeps cropping up like a primary formation through surface deposits; and if she’s anything like decent,

and unites good behaviour to capability, she gets snapped up by a follower, and as sure as sure, some evening, when you are sitting quietly in the parlour meditating on your mercies, in she comes and curtsies, and fumbles about at her apron-strings, and says that, as soon as you can find it convenient to suit yourself, &c., &c. You may always know what's coming when a girl begins to fumble at her apron-strings. It's discouraging, my dear Miss Hester, it really is."

And Miss Lapiter paused to take breath. Then Hester began to divine that her kind little maiden friend had met with some one likely to supply the place of Sally, whose wedding was to take place in a month. That servant business had lain like a dead weight on Hester's mind, ever since the

evening, six months ago now, when Sally came and knocked at the door, and, without any preparatory fumbling of apron-strings, or dropping of curtsies, had said, in just her plain, matter-of-fact way, as though announcing that the flour had run out, or that the supply of candles was getting short,

“Please, Miss, Tom Bilson and me is going to be wed as soon as he can meet with a cow likely for the business; and I thought I’d best let you know, so as you might have time to look round and suit yourself.”

And then Sally had gone back to Margaret, and with a brief—“I’ve got the missus told,” had resumed the hemming of some kitchen towels. Ever since that evening, then, Hester had been somewhat exercised in

her mind about domestic matters. Sally had lived with them a long time, and had got thoroughly used to their ways, and in her own plain, straightforward fashion had served them very faithfully. It was scarcely likely that any one would quite fill her place, be quite so honest and trusty. And so it was with real thankfulness that Hester said,

“Oh! Miss Lapiter, you have heard of a servant for us? That is kind of you.”

“Exactly so, Miss Hester—not the kindness, you know, but the servant—and that is just what I was on the point of coming to if you hadn’t stopped me. In fact, ever since you told me of Sally’s matrimonial prospects—and I’m sure I hope they will turn out successfully, and the milk business too—I have had you laid very much upon my mind, being, as I may say, so young

and inexperienced, and not so much push as some girls have, which is greatly to your credit, my dear, for push isn't a thing that I admire in a young lady, under any circumstances."

And then Miss Lapiter drifted away into an essay on push, through which it would be tedious to follow her, seeing that it lasted until Angusbury streets were left far behind, and wafts of perfume from its hawthorn hedges betrayed the nearness of Milcote Lane. However, in time she came back again to the servant business.

"Let me see, where was I? Oh! about your being laid upon my mind, as indeed you were, my dear, so much so as to disturb my rest at night. And I said to my maid Joan—you know Joan has been with me more than twenty years, and I tell her

everything, just like one of the family, 'Joan,' I said, 'Miss Tredegar is going to experience the troubles of life now, I'm afraid.' You see, my dear, servants are not what they used to be when I was a girl and kept my dear brother's house; with their parasols and their crinoline, and their Natural Philosophy, and their little three-penny worth of all sorts that is put into them at these cheap schools, so that it's almost more than a young girl like you can do to manage them. And one won't cook, and another won't wash, and this won't wait at table, and that won't clean the master's boots, and this young lady must have her evenings to study French."

"Oh! Miss Lapiter, surely not."

"Fact, my dear. I heard of a housemaid the other day that stipulated for her

evenings to study French; and another young lady must go out three times a week to a singing-class, and another must have bottled porter for supper, because she's liable to hysterics,—that really, my dear, I felt for you when I knew what you were going to have to contend with, and I felt drawn out in thankfulness, I did indeed, when this young person was brought under my notice."

"Then who is she, Miss Lapiter, and where does she live?"

"Not an Angusbury girl, my dear, and so much the better, because she won't fill the kitchen with young men under the pretence of cousins or anything of that sort, seeing she doesn't know a creature in the place. I came upon her quite by accident, as I may say. One of my young ladies

that I used to be governess to, wanted some plain sewing done in a hurry, so she asked me if I would look out for somebody who would do it nicely and tidily. And as I was going round with my tracts in one of the back streets, I happened to see a neat little bill in a window, 'Plain sewing taken in here.' Not that it was anything uncommon; you may see that notice in almost every other window as you go down Angsbury back streets, but this struck me because it looked new and clean, as if whoever put it there had only just set up in that line of business. So I went in and found it belonged to a poor girl who had lately come to the place, and was trying to get a living in that way. A poor way, too," continued the benevolent maiden lady, with a touch of sadness in her voice. "It's a starving thing,

a very starving thing, is plain sewing in a place like Angusbury, which, on account of having so many unoccupied ladies in it, is over-run with working-parties. Perhaps you haven't seen much of it, but if you had a tract district as I have, in one of the back streets, and saw the poor pinched faces, and sunken eyes, and lean shrivelled fingers that I have seen, and heard the pitiful pleadings for sixpenny worth of stitching just to keep body and soul together, you wouldn't soon forget it. No, that you wouldn't.

“Well, I made inquiries about the young woman, and they said she was decent and quiet, and well-behaved, and that sort of thing, though, of course, they couldn't speak positively as to anything further, she being quite a stranger in the place. And then she told me the name of the people in London

that she worked for before she came to Angusbury; and being very much interested in her, I wrote up for her character there, and it came down quite satisfactory, indeed, everything I could wish, and she had only left her situation on account of sewing-machines, which made them not want so many hands; which, you know, was sufficient reason, machines being sad things, almost as bad as sewing meetings, for taking the work out of poor women's hands.

“And so, as I was saying—dear me, if I can't see the cluster roses in your papa's garden! Well, I suppose I must walk all the way home with you, or I shan't get my tale finished,—as I was telling you, I got her this work, and that seemed to make me more interested in her, having to go several times to explain to her about it. It

was only a matter of five or six shillings, after all, and that soon goes when a woman has everything to find for herself out of it. The person she lodged with told me that very often she hadn't so much as a scrap of anything after breakfast, until late in the evening; and I'm sure I could believe it, for her cheeks are as hollow as the inside of a mussel-shell—it's painful to look at them, it really is! And so I said to her about a week ago, 'Now, Jane Fawcet,'—that is her name, my dear—'Jane Fawcet, this kind of thing won't do any longer. We must look out for something else for you, or we shall have you dying of starvation, and that's what nobody ever died of in Angusbury since I knew it. What should you say to going out into respectable service?'"

"The best thing she could do, I should

think," remarked Hester; "only she would want a very easy place, and a very kind mistress."

"Of course, and I shall come to that by-and-bye, if you don't interrupt me. Well, she didn't seem to take it up very much at first, but I believe, poor thing, hunger had worn her down to that degree of weakness that she hadn't energy enough to take anything up. So I told her she was to go to sleep upon it, and think it over, and I would come again next day. You know, when you get hold of a person of that sort, it's no use being offended with them because they don't come in to everything you suggest. Some people would almost starve before they would give up their liberty, and I was afraid she might be a woman of that sort, by the look of her.

“Well, I did come again—here we are at Milcote ;—no, my dear, I won’t come in, I’ll tell you the rest here at the gate—and in the meantime I had thought of you, and what a nice person she would be for you, and how you would be kind to her, and that sort of thing. So I said to her, ‘Now, Jane Fawcet, listen to me. I’ve a place for you in my mind, where you’ll be cared for like a human being, and not as if you were an intelligent mop, which is the light in which some people view their servants. It’s a young lady and her father that live in a very quiet way, and have a Christian woman for a house-keeper, and a boy to clean knives and shoes; and if ever there was a providential door opened in this world, it’s opened in that family, and it’s opened for you.’

“Now don’t interrupt me,” Miss Lapiter

continued, for Hester was going to make a remark; "I shall never get to the end if you talk too. Well, she still seemed to hang back and said something about not being strong, which, indeed, wasn't to be wondered at, for fourpence a day and lodging to find out of it, to say nothing of clothes, is rather reducing to the system. And so, to encourage her, I said, 'It's the quietest of places, Jane Fawcett, for Miss Tredegar doesn't keep any company, unless it is that I go in now and then, and perhaps Mrs. Brayton from Lellandsbank may take a cup of tea there once a month or so; and I told her, too, that for anything I knew, Mr. Nils might take a knife and fork with your papa occasionally, though I really cannot charge my memory that I have ever heard you mention his doing

such a thing. Still, you know, it was better to say what might happen.

“And I was glad I did tell her about its being such a quiet family, for it seemed to settle her directly. Not that she ran over with thankfulness, as some people would have done to be taken out of starvation, and have their feet set upon a rock, and a good home and plenty of plain food, which is a much more satisfying portion than plain sewing; but she lifted herself up and said in a stiff, dead sort of voice—poor thing, it was nothing but starvation that had given her such a voice—‘Miss Lapiter, I’ll go. And I’ll serve them the very best I can, and nobody shall ever say it against me that I’m not willing to learn, if only the lady will be patient and teach me at first.’

“It was the quiet family, you see, Miss Hester, that settled her to come. And then she asked me if I didn’t think she’d better come at once and inquire after the place, but I told her no, to be sure not. I must see you first, and have it properly talked over with you, whether you would like to venture upon her, because it wouldn’t do to make an engagement of that kind without proper consideration. She looked sadly anxious after that, and came down first thing next morning to know if I had seen you about it; but really, Miss Hester, what with this new boarder of mine—for you know the master of the School of Art is come to reside with me, and I’ve had the house papered from top to bottom, and several pieces of new furniture, because of his belonging to such a good family, late

father a clergyman—that really I've been almost run off my feet, and I haven't had time to attend to anything."

"Yes, Mrs. Brayton was telling me Mr. Brooke would most likely reside with you."

And though Hester said it so quietly, there was a bright flush upon her face, which Miss Lapiter did not observe, being just then engaged in looking at the Milcote cluster roses, which were, indeed, very beautiful, clambering quite round the lattice window, and up to the casement of Mr. Tredegar's study over the front door.

"Oh! Mrs. Brayton told you, did she? Well, I believe it was through Mrs. Brayton that he came at all, or, rather, Mr. Nils, who knew some of the committee, and they recommended him to Rose Cottage. And a very pleasant man too, al-

most the pleasantest man I have ever known; but I haven't time to enter into the subject now, or I could talk to you all the way back again to Angusbury about him, so very pleasant and friendly. And now, Miss Hester, I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll go down this very evening to Jane Fawcet, and tell her to come to Milcote to-morrow morning, and then, in the afternoon, you shall come and have a cup of tea with me, and we will talk it into shape. Won't that be the very thing, now?"

"I am sure, Miss Lapiter, you are very kind; but it is just like you. You are always doing good to everybody."

"Nonsense, my dear, don't talk about doing good. You see it has pleased Divine Providence not to bless me with any special interests of my own, and so I take

up those of other people, and try to do my fellow-creatures a kind turn now and then as I scratch along through life. So now good morning, and I hope everything will turn out nicely. You know it's such a relief to get anyone that can be trusted."

And away trotted little Miss Lapiter down the Milcote road, the sparrow bow flapping its wings lustily on the summit of her Dunstable bonnet.

But as Hester stood at the gate watching that tight little figure as it disappeared behind the sycamores, she was not thinking of Miss Lapiter's goodness, nor of the relief it would be to get a servant she could trust—if indeed this Jane Fawcet should turn out to be so very trustworthy. She

was only thinking how pleasant it would be to spend to-morrow evening at Rose Cottage.

CHAPTER XIII.

“PLEASE, Miss Hester, one wants you.”

And Sally ushered into the Milcote parlour, where her young mistress sat at work, a very plainly dressed person, eyeing her meanwhile with that curious questioning glance which a departing servant cannot help casting on one who may possibly have come to inquire after the place.

Sally was not what is commonly called a “deep girl.” She did not, as some others would have done under similar circumstances, loiter about the room under pre-

tence of dusting the furniture, or steal quietly to the door—which had been purposely left open—to catch stray scraps of conversation. But she did stay just long enough to hear the young woman say with a low curtsy,

“Miss Lapiter sent me, ma’am, about the place.”

Then Sally tramped back into the kitchen saying to herself—

“She’ll none match *me*, won’t that one, anyhow. No sort o’ push in her; walks as if she was made o’ lead bullets; like to see *her* put a bit o’ strength into a broom handle. Never set eyes on such a shiftless body in all *my* born days—never!”

And with that, Sally straightened her broad back and looked at the red rough hands which had done so many a hard

day's work—ay, and would do so many more, she hoped, before they were folded up for their final rest. Sally rather liked to feel that this new applicant was not everything that could be desired—that she should be missed when she took leave of the Milcote establishment. A very natural feeling, only improper when carried to too great an extent.

The young woman was Jane Fawcet, Miss Lapiter's *protégée*, a pale-faced, humble-looking woman, cleanly, but very poorly clad, and bearing in her thin, pinched features, ample testimony to the starving life she had led whilst she had been at Angusbury.

She was very different from the generality of modern domestic servants. She asked few questions, she made few inquiries, she seemed

to take it quite as a favour that she had been allowed to come after the situation at all. She was rather a peculiar-looking woman. There ought to have been plenty of resolution about her, judging from her firm compressed lip and square chin; plenty of observation too, for the glances which, when Hester's attention was for a moment diverted, she cast upon her, were sharp and piercing, even to unpleasantness. But there was nothing to match these indications of character in her humble, almost abject bearing, in the down-cast look and subdued voice with which she replied to Hester's questions respecting her previous mode of life.

She had come from London, she said, where she had been working for one of the large mantle warehouses. But having introduced sewing-machines, they were obliged to turn

off many of their hands, herself amongst the number, and she had come to Angusbury to seek work, in which search, however, she had hitherto met with scant success, and it was in consequence of Miss Lapiter's recommendation that she had determined to turn her attention to domestic service.

All this the young woman said in a low, unbroken, weary sort of voice, seldom raising her eyes to look at Hester. She did not seem remarkably promising. Neither good temper nor quickness could be inferred from her face and manner. But then, as Miss Lapiter remarked, hunger and poverty were sharp masters. These valuable qualifications might still be latent beneath that unprepossessing exterior, and when she got into a comfortable home, and found herself well cared for and well fed, she might, to

use Margaret's favourite expression, "pick herself up," and make a good servant after all.

She was very modest in her requirements; made no pretensions to superiority, professed great aptitude in nothing but willingness to learn, in which thing she had faithfully promised no one should ever have cause to find fault with her. She asked for no perquisites, no privileges; was not particular as to wages, as long as she had enough to clothe herself decently. All that she sought was a comfortable home—all that she offered in return was a pair of willing hands, with a willing head to guide them.

Hester thought that was enough. She asked her a few simple questions, such as her limited experience in servant-hiring sug-

gested, and then she sent Margaret in to complete arrangements.

"I think she'll do, Miss," said the thrifty housekeeper, returning to Hester after a few minutes' conversation with the girl. "I'm not afraid of anything but her temper; and maybe a comfortable place, such as we'll make for her at Milcote, 'll mend that. It's a bad thing is hunger for a body's temper, and she looks to me as if she'd had a pretty good nip o' that. I've known what it is to be hungered, Miss, myself, when I was a little 'un, before I took to get my own living; and it makes one feel bad, it does. I don't doubt, Miss Hester, but what you'll do right to let her come and make a trial. Maybe it's a leading o' Providence to bring her among them as knows religion and will try to do her

a bit o' good to her precious soul, for I'm thinking, Miss, by the look of her, that her feet hasn't been set in the ways of peace and pleasantness. And I'll do the best that lies in my possibles to make a good servant of her, and help her forward in her speritial interests."

"And," continued the Milcote housekeeper, whose "speritial" sense was tempered by a wholesome admixture of the wisdom of this world, "maybe you would give her a word about getting up betimes of a morning; that's the only thing I could wish the present Sally bettered in; and about the answering the door, Miss Hester, which it isn't my duty to do, though Sally puts it on to me because of her aprons being so dirty, as I tell her she ought to be ashamed of them. I think that's all, Miss, as strikes

me at the present, and I hope she'll be properly thankful to be took into a comfortable fam'ly, as will look both to body and soul, and keep 'em along in the right track."

"More, that, than even you can accomplish, Margaret."

So Jane Fawcet was engaged, and told she might come on the evening of the day that Sally left, which would be in about a fortnight. And in the meantime Hester gave her some sewing, which would help to pay for her board and lodging.

The girl dropped a low curtsy, and went away. Sally eyed her as she walked very slowly down the sunshiny garden path, stopping, when she reached the gate, to take a leisurely survey of the place.

"She'll do no good here, she won't. But it isn't no concern of mine to keep folks

out of a comfortable situation. Margaret says there's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. I say there isn't."

And now there was only that pleasant evening at Rose Cottage to be looked forward to.

CHAPTER XIV.

IF ever peace and quietness—no, not quietness exactly, but *comfort*—if ever peace and comfort took up their abode in any human habitation, they had assuredly fixed it in Miss Lapiter's cottage, which was situated near one of the trim little terraces inhabited by the trim little maiden ladies who abounded in the outskirts of Angusbury.

There was something in the very look of the house, with its dark green trellised porch, and garniture of vine and ivy, and snow-white blinds, and cramp-wood baskets

of mignonette creeping almost half-way up the windows, which marked it as belonging to a comfortable person—a person who enjoyed life to the full herself, and had the happy art of making others enjoy it too, if not to the full, at least to a very satisfactory extent. There was no vexatious regularity about Rose Cottage; no tread-on-me-if-you-dare defiance scowling forth from the shallow stone steps—scrupulously clean, though—which led up to the front door; no old maidish precision about the tiny flower-beds, which in summer-time were just one tangled, many-coloured wilderness of flowering annuals, sending out their sweetness, like Miss Lapiter's own good-nature, far and wide, for anyone who chose to take it and be thankful.

But when you got in—ah! but when

you got in, the only wonder was that you could ever prevail upon yourself to get out again. For such an air of cosy delightfulness seemed to meet you as soon as ever your feet pressed the India matting in that tiniest of entrance halls; and the chintz-covered easy-chairs in the parlour had such a way of not letting you get up; and the sleek tortoise-shell cat, which had been trained to receive all its mistress's friends into the bosom of its affection, purred forth such a mild welcome from the midst of the fleecy hearthrug; and if your visit chanced to be rather late in the afternoon—which, if you possessed the smallest amount of self-indulgence, would assuredly be the case—such a pleasant odour of short-cakes used to steal in from the culinary department; and little Miss Lapiter herself, all geniality and good-

nature, would take hold of both your hands so kindly, and insist upon your having a cup of tea with her—Joan would have it ready in a minute, that she would! Ah! there was no resisting that cheery voice—the easy-chair had you safely enough for all the rest of the evening.

When Hester came down to Rose Cottage, the owner thereof, arrayed in an ample gingham apron, which completely covered her diminutive person, and the neatest of neat print hoods, was planting out delicate spring annuals in the front garden. She had a bright smile and a kind word for her visitor, but the ceremony of shaking hands was precluded by a huge pair of wash-leather gloves, crusted over now with a deposit of sand and rich peat mould.

“Come into the garden, my dear, and sit

on that flower-pot which is turned upside down in the corner. I won't ask you to take your things off just yet, because I've a whole handful of these fancy balsams to pot, and I couldn't conveniently go upstairs with you. Well, and has Jane Fawcet been? And what have you done?"

"Yes, she has been, and I said what I thought was proper to be said, and Margaret thinks she will be a very likely person."

"And Margaret thinks quite right, too. There couldn't be a more likely person, as I said as soon as ever your situation entered my mind. And so, when is she to come?"

"The evening that Sally goes, which will be in about a fortnight. I think she is rather a queer-looking girl, though, so limp

and spiritless—such a contrast to Sally!”

“Hunger, my dear, nothing but hunger,” replied Miss Lapiter, mixing up a luxurious little puddle of sand and peat mould, into which she introduced a balsam plant, saying, as she patted the mould round its slender stem, “There, little Miss Peach-bloom, I hope that arrangement meets your views of the case. Hunger, my dear, that’s just what it is. If you had boarded and lodged yourself for five weeks on fourpence a-day, I fancy you would look rather queer too. You’ll see all that sort of thing will shell off from her when once she gets comfortably settled, and she will be as fresh as a newly peeled onion.”

“But not so productive of tears, I hope,” suggested Hester.

“To be sure not. I never thought of that.

No, Jane Fawcet will never make any one cry. She is one of those nice quiet plodding people, that you never know you have them in the house, they do everything so silently. And as for steadiness—”

“Yes, Margaret said she was sure we might trust her for steadiness.”

“Steadiness, my dear! she’s as steady as the Bank of England. I had the best of characters from the woman she lodges with—never rambles out at night, never has people come to see her, never stops to speak to any one in the street. And then, you know, your place will be the very thing, so quiet, such a small family, only two people.”

“No, Miss Lapiter, there will be three of us when little May comes home, and she is coming in six weeks.”

“Dearie me to-day! So she is. I never gave May a thought, the little golden-haired mischief! And so she’s coming home in six weeks, to take her place as a permanent member of the family. What a bundle of tricks she was two years ago, to be sure! as full of tricks as an egg is full of meat, Margaret used to say, but so affectionate—oh! so very affectionate! just as warm and bright as a beam of sunshine. She seemed to make such a difference in the house when she was at home two years ago. I declare you wouldn’t have known it for the same place, with that little creature laughing or singing, or else flashing about here and there and everywhere, just like a living beam of sunshine. I never saw anyone like May for bringing sunshine wherever she came.”

“Not that I mean,” continued the good-natured little maiden lady, fearing she might have grieved Hester, who looked rather thoughtful at the mention of this difference which her sister produced in the happiness of Milcote—“not that I mean for one moment—no, nor if any one was to give me all the world for it, I wouldn’t mention such a thought as that you don’t do everything that lies in your power to make home comfortable, and lay yourself out for your dear papa’s happiness, and all that sort of thing. For I’m sure I’ve said over and over again, that if there ever was a girl anywhere that did her duty, and was willing to deny herself for the sake of others, that girl is Hester Tredegar; but you see, my dear, and this is what I meant to say, there is a sort of shy-

ness and reserve about you that there isn't about your sister. Now, are you sure you understand?"

Hester was sure enough of that. It was a matter that did not require much understanding.

"The love is there, my dear, all the same, and perhaps a little more of it too; but you keep it corked up, and May doesn't. And if you won't be offended with me for telling you, love is a thing that doesn't improve with being corked up. It isn't like port wine or ginger-pop, nothing unless you *do* keep it well fastened. Love isn't at all a thing of that kind; on the contrary, it's good for nothing unless you bring it out and use it. You know, my dear, when people can't see it they are apt to think it isn't true. May lets

all hers come out. Now, I don't suppose if you tried ever so, you could go up to your papa as she used to do, and put your arms round his neck and kiss him, and then sit by him and take his hand and stroke it in that pretty way of hers. Indeed it wouldn't seem to suit if you did try, because it isn't natural to you, and it is natural to her. That's just what it is."

Hester sighed. Yes, that was true enough. Her love was a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. She felt sometimes as if she would have given anything to be able, as May did, to reveal all that was in her heart for that silent father of theirs. It would have been better for him, better for her too. But she could not do it.

"Shyness, my dear," continued Miss

Lapiter, "just shyness, nothing in the world but shyness. And though I'm thankful to say I don't know much about it myself, I daresay it's ten times more painful to the person that has it than it is to other people, and most likely you have found that out before now. But it can't be helped, and I always say that when things can't be helped we must just let them alone. You know we are as nature made us, every one of us."

"I am not sure of that," said Hester; "I think nature only makes a little bit of us, and we have to grow the rest; and if we don't grow right, it's our own fault."

"Well, I don't know. I never had much turn for moral philosophy, and when you get into free-will and responsibility, and

that sort of thing, you have your feet upon awkward ground—very awkward ground. Just try to do your little best where God has put you, and then you may let moral philosophy alone. You will get on very well without it. Here we are, you see, then, as Nature made us, every one of us. Though really, my dear, when I look at some people, I can't help thinking that Nature began to make them late on Saturday afternoon, when it was nearly time to give over work, and so she put them away before they were finished, and forgot to do anything more to them on Monday morning."

"Then if Nature forgot to finish them, you have no right to find fault with them for their defects."

"Exactly so, my dear, though every one would not be amiable enough to excuse

them in that way. But you see that leads you into the moral philosophy again, which, as I said before, is a troublesome place to get into, and so I always keep away from it; and how your little sister May managed to lead us into it at all, I'm sure I can't think, unless it was by the mode called circumlocutory. Yes, I recollect the beginning of it now; we were saying how different you two sisters are, and that led us to talk about shyness, and natural defects of character, and then on to responsibility. Pretty roundabout indeed! But, my dear, what I was going to say is this: You mustn't expect your sister May to be what she was two years ago; and, indeed, it wouldn't be at all proper if she was."

"I shall be very sorry if she is not, though."

“And I shall be very sorry if she is. Laughing, and singing, and dancing about like a sunbeam, may be all very well in a child of fourteen or fifteen; but life has its proprieties, my dear—life has its proprieties, and at the age of seventeen I always say a young person ought to become conscious of them. I shall be very disappointed if the lady who has had the charge of May’s education has not striven to impress them upon her.”

And Miss Lapiter drew up her little person and looked quite dignified. She had been a governess many years ago, and when she got into the education department, somewhat of the old stiffness used still to assert itself. But the idea of her pet sister coming under the control of the proprieties made Hester laugh heartily.

“No, no, Miss Lapiter; all the governesses in the world could never make my sister May a proper young lady. Mrs. Brayton tells me she will be altered, but I don’t believe it a bit. There was something about her that never could be pinched and squeezed up into the regular school-girl shape. You could no more make a fine lady of May than you could turn a blue-bell into a monkey-plant.”

“Which you certainly couldn’t do,” replied Miss Lapiter, shaking the sand from her wash-leather gloves before she tucked them up; “and so I suppose we must just come back to what we said before—that she is as Nature made her, and, therefore, the best thing we can do is to let her alone. Because, you know, whilst you continue together—though that certainly may

not be very long—you will balance each other nicely; for May will supply your deficiency of demonstrativeness—and you will excuse me, my dear, for saying that you have a little deficiency of that sort sometimes—and you will be a mother to her as regards responsibility and the proprieties of life, which I don't suppose she has much notion of."

And Miss Lapiter actually sighed, but perhaps it might only be the long stooping over those balsam plants that had made her back ache, for she was the last person in the world to make a trouble of anything.

"It will be all right," she said; "and I sincerely hope your sister, whether altered or not, will be a great comfort to you when she comes home. And I don't suppose, either,

that she will make much difference in the work of the house, so that I need not feel uncomfortable about not having mentioned it to Jane Fawcet. And now, as I've finished planting out my balsams, you shall take your bonnet off, and we will have a snug little chat in the front parlour. I've got a whole portmanteau full of things to talk to you about."

And with that Miss Lapiter called Joan to clear away the gardening tools, and the two ladies went into the house.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS LAPITER led the way through the tiny entrance-hall, certainly built before crinoline came into fashion, up the miniature staircase, and into a white curtained, mignonette scented chamber; chatting all the time in that merry, musical voice which never wearied those who listened to it, any more than the trickle of a mountain rill, or the dainty notes of a young canary, could have wearied them—it was so perfectly innocent and wholesome. Miss Lapiter's stream of talk, unceasing though it might be, was never tinged by one dark

drop of bitterness or malice. Years after, when her quiet life had spent itself, those who knew her best might have written on her gravestone these words, so seldom true of even the kindest-hearted women,

“We never heard her speak evil of anyone.”

When they came into the parlour, she settled Hester in a great easy-chair by the open window, and then, disinterring a brown worsted stocking, almost as big as herself, from a work-basket under the sofa, she composed herself to the leisurely enjoyment of what above all other things she most dearly loved—a quiet chat with a friend.

“You have been doing something to this room,” said Hester after a while, “but I cannot make out what it is. There is a difference somehow.”

"A difference! Yes, I should think there ought to be a difference somehow. If a lovely silver grey *fleur-de-lis* paper, after those libellous old-fashioned bunches of roses, isn't a difference, I should like to know what is. And a new chintz cover on the easy-chair, too, and a couple of dear little pincushion-footstools, and a fancy stand for my ferns—why, my dear, I fully expected you would go into ecstasies the moment you entered the room; and to think of you only finding out that there was a difference somehow! Surely, Miss Hester, your intellects are affected, or else you are in love—that is what it is!"

"No, Miss Lapiter," and Hester blushed in spite of herself, "that isn't at all what it is; but if you look at the piece of forehead just over my eyes, you will see

that my perceptive faculties are not large, and so, as the phrenologists say, I am not intensely awake to surrounding objects. I don't believe if my life depended upon it, I could give you, just at this moment, a correct description of the pattern on our tea-pot at home, though I must have sat before it hundreds of times."

Miss Lapiter jumped up and frisked away to the mirror over the chimneypiece to examine her own forehead.

"Full over the eyes—very full. Yes, that accounts for it. I never had much faith in phrenology before, but I shall begin to think seriously about it now. Well, Miss Hester, that tea-pot of yours is a convolvulus pattern, with one flower and two buds on one side, and two flowers and one bud on the other side. And a tendril

twisting just half way round the spout, under which it terminates to make room for a shield with the initials P. T. And I could tell you, too, the exact pattern of the cups and saucers, what we call the Greek key, and how many twists the key makes—one on the very little plates of all, two on the saucers, three on the large plates, and four on the dishes. Now, then, who will say I am not intensely awake to surrounding objects. Phrenology for ever!”

And Miss Lapiter frisked back again to the brown stocking.

“But I was going to tell you about the papering, my dear, only you began about phrenology, and disturbed the arrangement of my thoughts. Such a month as this has been, to be sure. Talk of a poet's May, I

think mine has been a charwoman's May ; what with painting, and papering, and white-washing, and scouring, and the people not being agreeable to accommodate each other, I do believe there's a deadly natural enmity between whitewashers and chimney sweeps ; they delight to spoil each other's work, and when the whitewashers can come, the sweeps won't—and when the sweeps will, the whitewashers can't. And then the paperers run against the painters, and the painters upset the paperers ; and, as likely as not, when all is finally done, and you feel as if you could return public thanks at church for it, the gas begins to jump, and a great dirty-booted man has to come into the house and up the stairs, and under the carpets, and amongst the wainscotting, for I never knew anything like gas for creeping about

along the wainscoting and making a commotion when it wants attending to. It's been a Spring much to be remembered, my dear, has this. I'm sure if it hadn't been for looking into my garden now and then, or seeing the ladies at church with their new bonnets, I should have forgotten that there were such things as primroses and violets—I should indeed!”

“Intensely awake to surrounding objects,” continued Miss Lapiter, knitting away vigorously. “Yes, an unmarried woman needs to be intensely awake to surrounding objects if she doesn't want the house to tumble about her ears when the Spring cleaning is going on. The workmen take such advantage when they know you haven't a gentleman to fall back upon. Do you think, if I'd had a gentleman to fall back

upon, that deceitful gas-man would have had the impudence to tell me that, because the gas jumped in the front parlour, I must have the skirting-boards up right away to the pipe in the kitchen?—Not he. He knew I was an unprotected female, and so he made a day's work of it. But I'm determined not to have anything of that sort next spring. I shall hire somebody into the house to march about with a hat and walking-stick, and *scold*, as if he was the master. I shall get my cleaning done then in half the time."

"Yes, and not have to be so intensely awake to surrounding objects," answered Hester. "But you don't always have such an upstir in May."

"And I hadn't need. But, you see, my dear, this was how it was. When I found

the new master was coming to reside with me, I felt it on my mind to rise to the occasion, especially as his late dear father was a clergyman, and I have such a respect for the Church. I often say that if anything *could* tempt me to marry, it would be a parsonage with four or five hundred a-year attached. And such a pleasant gentleman, oh! Miss Hester, such a pleasant gentleman as Mr. Brooke is! I was sure, from the very first moment when he sat down in that chair where you are sitting now, and placed his feet so as not to touch that bunch of white roses on the carpet, that the finger of Providence had directed him to my habitation. Why, Miss Hester, ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have plumped their feet down anywhere, careless whether it was white roses or brown drugget,

since they were only paying so much a week for the use of it; but that goes through everything with Mr. Brooke, so careful and particular in little things, and as true a gentleman as ever came into a house. And as soon as ever I noticed that circumstance about the white roses, I took him into my affections as a mother, and determined he should never want for puddings, or nice hot suppers, or anything in the way of domestic enjoyments, whilst I had strength to get them ready for him—no, nor he shant't either."

And Miss Lapiter clinched that statement by a vigorous nod, which set all the little flaxen curls in motion, greatly to the delight of the tortoise-shell cat, who thought they were dancing so merrily for her sole and special amusement.

“Yes, and so disposed to be friendly, too,” she continued, seeing that as yet Hester showed no signs of weariness—“quite disposed to be friendly. And when I told him that I was going to have a young lady, Miss Tredegar, one of his pupils, to see me this evening, and would he take tea with us here instead of having it sent up to the drawing-room, he brightened up at once, and said it would give him the greatest of pleasure. He recollected your name quite well, and said you were one of the most advanced pupils in the school. Stay!—isn’t that his foot-step on the gravel walk? Yes, I’m sure it is, so gentle and light; you might think it was a woman’s for gentleness and lightness. I’ve learned to know his step just as if he were my own son, I have.”

Hester drew back within the shadow of the curtains. Yes, it was a very light step. Just so lightly he had come up behind her that day at the Monk's Crag, just so lightly that other day at the School of Art, she knowing nothing about it until he was close upon her. Just so lightly too, with just so noiseless, gentle a step, was he coming into her open, empty heart. Some day, turning, she would find him there, there to go no more out.

How pleasant it was to sit in the shadow of the curtains and think that he was so near, that by and by he would come into the room where she was, and stay there for the whole long evening! How different that evening would be from the solitary Milcote evenings, when hour after hour passed without a sound but the distant hum of Mar-

garet's voice singing hymns in the kitchen, or the clink of Tom Bilson's milk-pails down the side path, followed by long whisperings between him and red-faced Sally, who was always near the side-door waiting for him. So different.

Yet Hester did not start with painful consciousness this time. Just as quietly as she would have taken some great grief, she took this great joy. It was her way to be silent about anything that stirred her deeply. Nothing would ever rouse her into that nervous restlessness which sudden joy or sorrow works in some natures. Perhaps it was her fault, certainly afterwards it was her misfortune, that others knew so little of her inner life, that when the lamps were burning in the chambers of her heart, she drew the curtains closely down, so closely

that none passing by felt the brightness and was lured by it to enter there and rest. So there was only a slight flush upon her face when Mr. Brooke came in, and Miss Lapiter, who was in an exalted mood this evening, after formally introducing them to each other, took Helen's hand and put it into that of the new master.

"You're not just to bow, I haven't patience with people just bowing and nothing more. You must shake hands, for I mean you to be very good friends."

"Miss Tredegar and I have already settled that between ourselves," said Mr. Brooke with his never-failing, easy courtliness. "You remember your promise?"

"Yes, and I will keep it."

"So will I."

Then they all three settled down, and the

conversation began, to sparkle away merrily enough, as it always did in Rose Cottage parlour. Never any vexatious silences there, never any awful pauses, during which the guests looked alternately at the fire and each other, hoping against hope that somebody would think of something to say, even though it were the shallowest commonplace.

For the first time now, Hester got a satisfactory look into Mr. Brooke's face. Certainly, as Miss Lapiter said, he was a very pleasant man—a man that would be prized anywhere, but most of all in a place like Angusbury, where pleasant men were like the tea-leaves in a boarding-house urn, few and very far between. Judging by his personal appearance, life had been a successful thing for him. He had not

found it a vale of tears, or a desert path, or a howling wilderness, nothing of the sort. And he never would find it such either, for there was a fine elasticity in his nature which would adapt itself to surrounding circumstances instead of being galled by them. Possibly, too, there was a corresponding elasticity in his moral system, by whose help he might tide over those little conscientious uncomfortablenesses which mar the peace of careful souls.

But we have no right to judge Basil Brooke by possibilities. His life had been mercifully—or unmercifully—sheltered from all need of toil and strife. He had never had to brave the world's frown, or to bear about with him through long painful years the deep sting of remorse for some inadvertent act. The tide of time had floated

him gently down, and anchored him at last in this quiet little haven of Angusbury town, where, with an easy situation, a comfortable salary, and a more than average amount of talent, it was entirely his own fault if he did not make a pleasant thing of life.

But no such speculations as these passed through Hester's mind as she sat by the open window in Miss Lapiter's parlour, sometimes bending over her work, sometimes playing with the cluster roses, whose long sprays blew quite into the room; but oftener stealing a quiet glance at Basil Brooke, who sat chatting there on the sofa so easily and pleasantly. All subjects seemed alike welcome to him. He could with equal facility discuss Miss Lapiter's flowers, the new method she was trying with carnation

cuttings, the best way of planting out delicate spring annuals, or cultivating choice ferns. Which last topic led him to speak of the Monk's Crag, and a certain pleasant day he had spent there, not long ago, taking sketches of some of the prettiest views. And from the Monk's Crag, with its wood, and water, and winding moss-grown path, the transition was natural enough to foreign scenery and the delightful little tour he had had the summer before with his sister and some other friends, among the peaks and glaciers and chalets of Switzerland. All seemed to follow so easily, so naturally. It was pleasant to listen to him. There was the mark of cultured taste and perfect refinement in everything he said. His was a mind that gathered up only beauty, leaving all the

rest. And even his occasional satire on the ways and weaknesses of the people who had been their fellow-travellers on that little tour, was so delicate, so playful, so free from anything offensive. Even had he turned it upon themselves, Miss Lapiter and Hester could scarcely have been wounded by it, so merrily did it sparkle, like little steel blades in the sunshine.

Yes, it was thoroughly delightful to listen to him, and equally so to be listened to by him. For he had that fine tact, so rarely met with, which makes people at ease with themselves by making them believe that what they say is novel and interesting. And that is an art which very few can resist. For even the dullest likes to feel that he can say something good; likes to note the respectful attention, the courteous

smile with which a man of this fine cultivated tact will meet his poor stumbling attempts at conversation.

Hester could not help contrasting Mr. Brooke with Nils Brayton, the only other Angusbury gentleman with whom she had come into anything like close contact. Nils Brayton, so quiet, so almost awkward in society, with no pleasant store of anecdote, no vein of playful satire; only that grave, immutable common-sense and steady uprightness which made everyone feel quite safe with him. And Hester began to think that feeling quite safe was not the pleasantest feeling in life.

Looking up from this mental contrast, she found Mr. Brooke's eyes fixed upon her earnestly, so earnestly that she turned hers very quickly away.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Tredegar, but your face, as I see the profile of it against those green leaves, is so like that of Ceres in the School of Art. If I believed in the transmigration of souls, I should say that Phidias had met you when you were a Greek girl, wandering through the corn-fields, and had graven you in his marble for ever. And that reminds me of what I was doing yesterday afternoon. Will you forgive me when I tell you?"

"Tell me, and then I will promise."

"I got the key of the private class room and looked over all your drawings. I daresay it was not quite right; but I would willingly re-commit the sin, if I could secure such a pleasure again as I enjoyed then."

"I don't think you did any wrong," said

Hester ; and the colour on her cheeks might only have been because the cluster roses were so near them. "The old master used often to turn out those drawers. You know they are considered the property of the school until after the prizes are given."

"Then I shall very often go and look them over again. One pleased me particularly, a bunch of wild flowers lying on a broad leaf, and just one little spray of forget-me-not, which seemed as if it had fallen away from the rest, and lay poised on the edge of the leaf, ready to fall. Did you arrange that yourself?"

"Yes. I only finished it two or three weeks ago. I worked at it alternately with my crayon piece. I dreamed about it, and saw it just as I painted it."

"So did I dream about it, too. But I

dreamed that some one came and picked up the little forget-me-not, and carried it away."

"Dear me! How very funny," said Miss Lapiter, who, busy in counting the stitches of her stocking heel, had not meddled with the conversation for a minute or two. "Dreams certainly are the oddest things. I could tell you some that I have had, only I don't much like them as a subject of conversation, they always give me the megrims. Don't dreams give you the megrims, Mr. Brooke?"

"Mine last night did not," replied Mr. Brooke, with a glance at Hester, who was working away with most needless industry at a piece of silk netting for a purse. She missed the glance, not being just then intensely awake to surrounding objects.

So did Miss Lapiter, though from quite an opposite cause, she being too intensely awake to the tea-things, which Joan had just brought in, to have any attention left for surrounding objects. And then they all gathered round the table to what she used to call a “chat and muffin entertainment.”

CHAPTER XVI.

WHICH chat and muffin entertainment lasted until the sunlight began to come in very slantingly through the laurel bushes at the bottom of the garden, making even the tiny balsam plants cast long shadows on the grass—shadows which lengthened and lengthened as the sky grew crimson with the flush of departing day.

After the muffins came conversation, and then music, and then more conversation, until twilight crept in upon them, and the red bloom of the roses could no longer be distinguished from their clustering leaves,

and the many-coloured flower-beds were just one sombre mass of shadow, and the mignonette in the cramp-wood basket under the window could only be known for mignonette by the delicious wafts of scent which it kept sending into the room. Quiet twilight, when everyone talks more freely, and fancy and feeling have more room, and tender thoughts that daylight bids away, come nestling down so gently in the willing heart, stealing out sometimes into words which, when prosaic, matter-of-fact morning comes again, we almost wish unsaid. Only they cannot be unsaid.

Ah! what a pleasant time that was, all three of them sitting there in the half dark, sometimes talking, sometimes mingling their speech with long spells of silence, that seemed sweeter than any words! Miss

Lapiter was far too wise to break in upon it by the lighting of the gas, although her fingers were positively tingling for want of something to do, and she dare not set to work upon the brown stocking, lest the stitches should drop, for she was just casting off the heel, and that casting off the heel was rather a critical performance, unless there was abundance of light to do it by.

So she sat still—not that sitting still was an occupation after her own heart, or that she greatly enjoyed the conversation, which turned chiefly upon poetry, and music, and landscape scenery, and Alpine glaciers; nor yet those long, frequently-recurring silences, in which nothing was to be heard but the flutter of leaves outside, or the lazy purring of the tortoise-shell cat on the hearthrug.

Could she have followed the bent of her own mind, she would much rather have swept away the fine arts and the spells of silence, and begun to talk about Angusbury affairs, its incipient flirtations, engagements, and marriages; or of pale-faced, hollow-eyed Jane Fawcet, who was even now stitching away for food and shelter in that dingy little attic in one of Angusbury back streets; or of her own home life, with its innocent current of cares, and duties, and pleasures, planting out of balsam slips, tending of delicate spring annuals, cultivating of choice ferns. Much rather any or all of these than the poetry and music, and fine-art conversation, of which stray sentences caught her ear now and then. Only—and then she looked across the room to Basil Brooke and “my dear Hester,”

whose faces she could no longer see for the deepening gloom. She could but hear their voices, low, murmuring, dreamy. No, she would not for all the brown stockings in the world have spoiled that twilight talk of theirs.

Excellent Miss Lapiter, one of the most excellent of the earth. But she was only a woman after all, and far down in the deepest recesses of that benevolent little heart of hers there lurked a woman's love for matchmaking. Nothing gave her more pleasure than to behold the happiness of those she loved, unless, indeed, it was to be the means of increasing that happiness. She believed—rightly enough, too—that women, and especially such women as Hester Tredegear, are never so happy as when sheltered in the sweet coverture of home

life, sitting by their own firesides, loving and beloved, or, as she used to express it, "advantageously settled."

Not that by the phrase "advantageously settled" Miss Lapiter meant to imply anything mercenary. Nothing of the sort. She was no believer in the popular fallacy of marrying for a home, still less marrying for a position. If there was one person more than another whom in her heart of hearts Miss Lapiter despised, it was the woman who bartered freedom and self-respect for the sake of having a living earned for her, fine clothes given to her, and a roof kept over her head, by a man to whom she had brought neither love nor reverence in exchange for them. If ever the good-tempered little mistress of Rose Cottage waxed wroth, it was when she

heard of such marriages as these; and, alas! she heard of them only too often, as anyone may who mixes much in social life. But when the love and the reverence were there, the unquestioning faith, the perfect trust—ah! then little Miss Lapiter would career away into such a long, long disquisition on the usefulness and honourableness and superiority of married life over all other life, that any one might think she had been in the full, perfect, and complete enjoyment of the same ever since she attained to years of discretion.

It was better then—ininitely better, for women to be advantageously settled, whenever that settlement could be contrived for them by honourable and legitimate means. And ever since that Monday evening, three weeks ago, when the new master of the

School of Art had taken up his abode at Rose Cottage, falling so contentedly into its quiet ways, behaving himself in such a gentle, courtly way towards all its inmates, conscientiously abstaining from setting foot upon the white roses of the parlour carpet, coming home punctually every night as the abbey clock struck the hour of nine, and in various other ways commending himself to her admiration and respect, Miss Lapiter had made up her mind that he was the very man for "dear Hester;" and she had also made up her mind to facilitate matters for both of them to the very farthest extent within her reach.

That was the reason—oh! guileful Miss Lapiter to place it to Jane Fawcett's account—that was the reason she had asked Hester to Rose Cottage on the only even-

ing in the week when there was no young men's class at the School of Art. That was the reason she had sat so patiently for a whole long hour in the twilight, whilst they chatted together about fine arts and poetry, forgetful alike of time and gloom. That was the reason, too, why, when that gloom had deepened into night, and Hester rose to go away, Miss Lapiter wisely refrained from offering Joan's services as an escort to Milcote. For did she not know well enough who was far too much of a gentleman to let any lady walk alone over two miles of unfrequented country road? And did she not know, too, that an hour's leisurely stroll through the dusky June night would do more towards that settlement which she was so anxious to bring about, than whole weeks of "chat and

muffin entertainments?" Miss Lapiter was a person of undeniable discernment and foresight.

But apart from a certain natural goodness of heart, which made him always willing to do a kind action for anyone, when the doing of it did not involve serious self-denial, Mr. Brooke was really glad of that two miles' walk with Hester Tredegear. There was something about her which had already fascinated him. Chance words of hers now and then had given him a glimpse into the rare beauty and sweetness of the soul which lived and felt beneath that veil of shy quietness. He would like to know more of her. He would like to make her trust him, to make her feel at home with him. He was a great lover of beauty, beauty of form, beauty of mind. Hester gave him

both. As an artist, she pleased him; as a man of keen refinement and cultivated taste, she contented him. All that was best, purest in himself, found its response in her.

Besides, Basil Brooke loved admiration. It was to him what warmth and sunshine are to the tropic plant. Hester gave him that too. The willing silence with which she listened when he spoke, the way in which she would mould her thoughts to his, or take back her own opinions when they clashed with his, was an unconscious homage which pleased him more than he cared to tell. And pleased him all the more that it was so unconscious. She did it because she could not help it.

So it was not politeness only which made Mr. Brooke so willing to take that long

walk to Milcote. It was a pleasant walk for both of them. He could be a very choice companion when he tried, and this evening he did try. His almost womanly perception taught him how to adapt himself to varying shades of character. He seemed to find out, as if by intuition, what people liked to talk about; then he would shape his course accordingly, and no matter how slight or frail the subject, that ready tact of his never failed to invest it with a charm. His mind was like one of those ingenious toys, which, by a clever arrangement of mirrors, converts even the most shapeless, unpromising strokes into a graceful and artistic design. And just as the day before he had adapted himself with easy good-nature to Mr. Bilson's harmless peculiarities, so now he bent to that finer, more

subtle nature with which he had to deal. He made Hester feel, shy and reserved though she was, that it was a pleasure to him to listen to her; that she could give something to him out of her little store of life and experience, something that he might enjoy and prize. And Hester was woman enough to feel that pleasure very keenly.

It was a pleasure Nils Brayton never gave her. She never felt, perhaps she had never really wished to feel, that she could do anything for him. It was strange the difference in talking to him and talking to Mr. Brooke. With Nils Brayton she seemed hushed and quieted. He was far above her, quite out of her little track. She could only take from him, never give to him. His presence was always a great rest, but

she wanted something more than rest now. It was a question hard to answer, whether rest, quietness, safety, would ever satisfy her again.

So on they went through the warm, dusky twilight, along the narrow Angusbury streets, where scarce a footstep save their own broke the silence, past that broad unprotected bit of high-road, where, not very long ago—but it seemed a long time now, so many things had happened since—Hester met the poor woman with her bundle. She never turned that corner now without thinking of the bent form, and the weary, hopeless groan, which had made her feel so sad. Where was the woman now? Had the great town of Millsmany given her a shelter in some of its garrets or cellars?—had it given her a place to work, and food to keep

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life's light still flickering within those hollow, heavy eyes?

Hester had asked Jessie whether they were in time for the train, and Jessie had said "yes;" it was there just ready to go away as they got into the station. So she had not turned back on a fruitless errand after all.

There was only one thing that troubled her through all the long pleasant walk, and that was what they should do when she reached Milcote. It would look so unkind not to ask Mr. Brooke to come in, after taking the trouble to walk so far with her; and yet she knew that it would be an unmitigated bore to her papa to leave his books and be introduced to a stranger. Besides, what impression would Mr. Brooke have of him, and of their home life, and of that

dim, sparsely furnished parlour, so different, even in spite of all that she could do, to Miss Lapiter's cosy little nest, where all was modest luxury and comfort? There had come into Hester's mind that loving, longing anxiety that all about her now should be comely and inviting. Once she had not cared so much about it.

But she need not have troubled herself. Some kind little fairy had arranged it all without any care of hers. Mr. Tredegar was walking up and down the garden when they came to the gate. In an idle mood, too, for his spectacles were pushed up over his high, narrow forehead, as he always used to push them up when he had finished studying. And, hearing Hester's step and voice, he came to the gate to meet her.

"Papa, this is Mr. Brooke, our new master at the School of Art. He has been kind enough to walk home with me from Miss Lapiter's."

The habitual "All right, my dear!" was just upon Mr. Tredegar's lips, but he checked himself in time, and gave a courteous greeting to the strange gentleman who had been kind to his daughter. Perhaps, though Hester knew it not, no one could win her father's heart more easily than by kindness to herself. For he did love her very much, though he was too proud to show it.

When Mr. Brooke was disposed to be friendly, few people could resist that winning manner of his. Mr. Tredegar found that he could not. And, perhaps, the dusky starlight made it more easy for him to talk

freely with a stranger. However that might be, Hester was astonished to hear them conversing together as her father had never yet conversed with any one in Angusbury. Still more astonished was she, when Mr. Tredegar said, and said it, too, as if he meant what he said,

“Will you come in and rest for a little while before you return?”

But Mr. Brooke declined. It was enough to have the invitation; another time he would avail himself of it.

“Not to-night, thank you. My little landlady will be anxious about me. But Miss Tredegar has promised to show me some of her drawings from the School of Art. May I come another night and see them?”

“Certainly; come whenever you like, Mr.

Brooke. We cannot offer many attractions to strangers, but you are welcome to such as we have."

Mr. Brooke bowed low. Someday he would remind the stately master of Milcote of that promise.

"Good night, little forget-me-not," he said, in a low tone to Hester, who stood slightly apart, scarcely knowing whether to be more surprised or pleased with her father's unwonted sociality. "It will be pleasant for us to know each other better."

And, with those words, he raised his hat to them both and went away.

CHAPTER XVII.

THEN followed the long June days, when, at sundown, the blackbirds piped so loudly in the tall sycamore trees, while from the hedges beneath, which had cast off their veil of hawthorn bloom for a garniture of wild red rose and eglantine, the robins answered with saucy melodious whistle. Beautiful June days, when the sunlight flooded Milcote garden, and crept so idly from gable to gable of the low, red brick house, and played at hide-and-seek among the vine leaves by Mr. Tredegar's study

window, and opened blossom after blossom on the jasmine tree that clambered over the porch, breathing into each a sweet secret which, at evening time, it told forth again in wafts of perfume.

And it was on the pleasantest of these June evenings that Jane Fawcet, with one very small trunk, containing all her worldly goods, came to take up her abode at Milcote; came stealing along with such slow, noiseless footstep down the side path leading to the open kitchen door, that Margaret, who was sitting at the table reading, heard no sound, nor did she know that the new maid had come, until after standing there for more than ten minutes taking careful note of everything that was to be seen, Jane Fawcet dropped a humble curtsy, and said,

“If you please, Miss Tredegar said ‘I was to come to-night.’”

To which Margaret answered briskly and cheerfully,

“Goodness, honey! I was agate with the Psalms and didn’t hear you. You beat the former Sally for stillness, anyhow. Come your ways in and sit you down. And I hope it ull be a good thing for Milcote and yourself as ever ye came nigh hand the place.”

Jane said nothing to that, only curtsied again, and began to fold up her shawl—that worn old shawl, whose fringes had caught Nils Brayton’s walking-stick at the turn of Angusbury road two months before.

Quietly as she entered upon her place, so quietly did she go about her duties in

it. A wonderful contrast in every respect to Sally, who had no gift for silence, and always liked everybody to know what she was about. Indeed, Sally never thought she was doing her work properly unless she made a brisk noise over it, or set up a vigorous whistle by way of accompaniment. After Jane had been in the place a week or two, Margaret said that Milcote kitchen did not know itself again for quietness; one might as well, she said, have had a ghost walking about and putting things in their places. And, indeed, the girl did not look unlike a ghost with that close, white-frilled cap tied under her chin, and that pale, shrunken face, and those heavy, half-shut eyes, which never seemed to see anything higher than the brick floor. Margaret did not like people who always held their

heads down, who never looked you straight in the face when they were speaking to you. She thought it was a bad sign—a harbinger of deceit or double-dealing. Jane Fawcet had not cast her eyes down in that way when she came to see after the place, or Margaret would almost have advised Miss Hester not to have anything to do with her

But the girl did her work well, there was no denying that; and she had no silly notions about dress and followers, nor did she go flaunting about on Sunday afternoons with half a dozen flounces and a fringed parasol, like the Angusbury servants. And she asked no questions either, and did not seem disposed to pry into the family concerns; so, perhaps, that downcast look was only shyness; she would get over it

when she became more accustomed to her place—at least, the housekeeper hoped so.

And certainly, for modest, quiet behaviour, she was the best girl that had ever come into Milcote kitchen since Margaret had had anything to do with it; the meekest, too, in spite of that queer look about her eyes, which they once thought indicated temper. For, as Margaret said, you might order her about where you pleased, or tell her to do this, that, and the other thing, and scold her to the very furthest possible extent to which it is allowable for a professing Christian to scold—whatever that extent may be—and Jane never “back-answered again,” or gave you so much as a cross look. She only turned a little whiter, and her lips twitched a little—never anything more

than that; whereas Sally, under the same treatment, would have stormed for a whole day, and then turned sulky during the remainder of the week.

And then, as Margaret continued, giving her opinion of the new maid to Miss Hester, her willingness to learn was something wonderful, considering she had never been in service before, and didn't seem so much as to know the names of many of the things which were in daily use in Milcote kitchen. She was a very child for teachableness and humility, only that children forget what you have taught them the very next moment, and Jane Fawcet never had to be told the same thing twice. If only she would learn to look people straight in the face, and if she would eat heartily enough to bring a little flesh into those

lean cheeks, and a little spring into that listless, drooping figure, she would soon be as good a servant as anyone need wish to possess ; indeed, far in advance of the former Sally.

The former Sally was married now, and settled in the milk business as Mrs. Bilson, junior. It was one pleasant June morning, just a week after Jane Fawcet came to Milcote, that Sally, after using an extra quantity of pomatum to her hair, and putting on the brown spotted print, with cape to match, and a pair of clean white thread gloves, took her father's arm, and, followed by the bridegroom and his sister, also in pomatumed hair, and clean white thread gloves, walked across the fields to Milcote Church, where she and Thomas, "bless him !" appropriated each other for better for

worse, according to the rites of the Church. After which appropriation, they both repaired to the newly-furnished cottage, and settled down forthwith, without any intervention of marriage jaunt or honeymoon, to sober wedded comfortableness, young Mr. Bilson carrying out the milk at night just as if nothing particular had happened.

But though the cottage took a deal of minding, and the "business," especially when, as was sometimes the case, Thomas went out to a day's farm work in the country, was one person's work, what with milking, and then going round amongst the customers, Sally found time to run down to Milcote now and then, just to see how they got on with the fresh girl. It gave her a sort of important feeling to sit as a visitor in

that kitchen where once she had toiled so industriously through many a long day ; to be addressed as "Mrs. Bilson" by the honest old housekeeper, who never used to call her anything but "my lass," or "Sally, honey," according to the state of her temper. Somehow Sally never seemed to have so exalted a sense of her married position as when seated in the Milcote kitchen, listening to the old familiar sounds, looking round upon the old familiar sights, watching the old household operations, which were performed in the same routine as when Thomas used to come courting her, and they sat by that kitchen fire on Margaret's "class nights," talking about the cottage and the "business."

To tell the truth, Sally, though she was a most excellently disposed person, would

not have been very much grieved had the work stuck fast now and then under the management of her successor. It was a little bit provoking to find that things went on just the same as usual; that, as Margaret had said some weeks before, there were as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it; that, with the exception of much of the previous noise and bustle, life at Milcote drifted on as heretofore. And more provoking still to note Margaret's undisguised satisfaction with her new help, the quiet content with which she would watch Jane Fawcet's slow, noiseless movements, and then turn to Sally with a look which said plainly enough,

“I told you so!”

Nevertheless Sally believed it would come to an end, sometime. “New brooms sweep

clean!" was a proverb quite as true as that other one which Margaret was so fond of quoting. And as she tied on her bonnet, and set off home again, to attend to the milking of the cow, she would say to herself,

"I don't know what put it there, nor how I came to think it, but it lies strong upon my mind, it does, as how Jane Fawcet won't do no good in that there place."

Sagacious Sally!

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR Hester those June days passed so sweetly, that she forgot to note the swiftness of their flight, nor how near the day was drawing—once so impatiently looked forward to—when little May should come home and stay always.

Sometimes, waking up from that happy dream in which all life seemed to be spent now, she would chide herself for what seemed like forgetfulness, or want of love. Then she would try to think of something that could be done for May's comfort. She would go into that pleasant

little casemented chamber which had been newly curtained and painted for the pet sister, and she would contrive some fresh adornment for it. She would add here a picture, there a vase for flowers, re-arrange the furniture, loop the white muslin draperies in more graceful folds, move the tiny writing-table, so that May, sitting at it, might see the Milcote Lane sycamores with the church tower peeping through them. May might have been a little bird, she was so fond of trees and sunshine. And then she would try to picture to herself the long sweet hours they would spend in the garden together, reading, or castle-building, or more likely talking over those two dreary years which they had passed away from each other. And how everything should give way to May; how her

will should be everyone's pleasure; how they would all try to make life such a bright, happy thing for that young sister concerning whom the dying mother had said years ago,

“Hester, take care of little May, and be very kind to her. She will have no one but you.”

It had been Hester's joy to keep that trust hitherto. Patiently and lovingly she had borne all toil and self-denial which it involved. And as she had kept it, so would she keep it to the end.

Still, chide herself as she might, the thought of May's coming home was not the brightest thought now. She was just beginning to feel, as she had never felt before, how fair and how beautiful a thing it is to live. All the years that had gone

by seemed as a long, quiet twilight, through which she had passed at last into sunny noontide. And as the days drifted so peacefully on, each one bringing with it some pleasant dream fulfilled, some sweet hope translated into sweeter memory, she could but say, in the gladness of her heart,

“ My God, I thank Thee, who hast made
This world so bright.”

Yet Hester told no one of any of these things. She had no very dear friends with whom to exchange sentimental confidences, and gossip over those young hopes which, like wild flowers dragged from the shade, lose all their beauty when drawn out of the holy silence in which they move and have their being. Her happiness was like some quiet little stream whose course is

known only by the greenness of the grass through which it flows, and the fragrance of the flowers which spring upon its banks. In those old days, when her life was empty and unsatisfied, she bore the emptiness without complaining; now that joy had come, she kept it silently too. Enough that from her own gladness she made others glad, without telling them whence that gladness came.

And all this time Nils Brayton was working steadily on, contented if now and then he caught a glimpse of Hester's face as she passed that gloomy office window on her way to and from the School of Art, or could listen to her voice for a moment or two as they met by chance in the quiet Angusbury streets. He, too, had his work to do, and he would do it. By a pure

and noble life he would blot out the memory of far-off wrong. By honest, kindly deeds he would make that right hand of his all white, and worthy to reach forth one day and clasp hers. Whilst that hope shone before him, he had strength for all toil, and patience for all waiting.

Jane Fawcet, too, plodded silently on through the dull round of household drudgery, learning very readily, and practising very carefully, such duties as belonged to her place. She never murmured over anything, never kindled into anger or discontent when Mr. Tredegar's stern, haughty voice commanded some menial service from her. When little Miss Lapiter's step was heard upon the gravel walk, or when Basil Brooke came—as he often did come now—for an hour's chat with Hester's father, Jane would

open the door for them, curtsying low, and stepping humbly back as they entered, that their more exalted social presence might not be soiled by any touch of those humble garments of hers. And when she had ushered them into the parlour, carefully noting through her half-closed eyes Hester's flushed face and glad, bright smile, she would go back into the kitchen, and sit there over her sewing work, with never a word, until Margaret said to herself,

"Beats everything for quietness. Never seed such a quiet girl in all *my* life."

But at night, when the work was done, when there was no more need for guile or self-restraint, Jane Fawcet used to go up into her own room, and bolt the door, and take out of that deal box a scrap of newspaper, almost worn away now with frequent

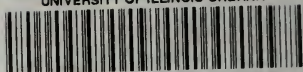
folding and unfolding. And as she read those two or three lines, down in one corner, relating to "Naval and Military intelligence," the mask which she had worn so carefully all day would fall off, revealing the true face of cold cruel malice beneath. And she used to say, with a low laugh,

"Patience, patience. Waiting is long, but revenge is sweet. It was well the train went away without me—it was very well!"

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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